

Marguerite Yourcenar:  
authenticity, modernity  
and the political aesthetic

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the notion of authenticity and its existential, aesthetic and political determinations in the work of Marguerite Yourcenar. It aims to trace the desire for authenticity in Yourcenar's fiction and criticism and to assess the strategies employed to preserve the possibility of authentic representation.

The investigation focuses on two aspects of the problematic of authenticity: subjectivity and politics. Both are discussed by Yourcenar in predominantly aesthetic terms. She argues that individual existence cannot be understood in its own uniqueness because it is entrapped within representational structures. The impasse of representation also affects the political self-constitution of nations and communities. Yourcenar's response to this problem is developed through her meditation on art and time. She observes that authenticity is not a question of original creativity, but one of accepting the perishing of all representations in time. She also understands realism as a critically aware choice to accept the limits of narrative representation.

Yourcenar attempts to rescue the notion of authenticity for modernity by foregrounding difference and repetition. The thesis discusses this strategy in relation to de Man's thought on irony and history, Benjamin's writing on film and translation, and Heidegger's analysis of spatio-temporality. The last part of the thesis focuses on poststructuralist interpretations of Heidegger by Lacoue-Labarthe and Lyotard. It is argued that the model of political self-realization which Yourcenar proposes for post-war Europe can be associated with Heidegger's vision of national identity in Nazi Germany. Yourcenar's *Mémoires d'Hadrien* is used as a case study showing the ambivalence of her discourse on authenticity, a discourse which hovers uncomfortably between modern political aestheticism and the desire to overcome aestheticism at large. This conclusion helps to contextualize Yourcenar's work in relation to political and philosophical modernity. It also highlights the vicissitudes of the search for authenticity in twentieth-century Europe.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

*OR*: Marguerite Yourcenar, *Œuvres romanesques*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1991; repr. 2000), Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 303.

*EM*: Marguerite Yourcenar, *Essais et mémoires* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 378.

# INTRODUCTION

In her fiction and criticism, Marguerite Yourcenar strongly suggests that it is possible for man to develop an authentic relationship with the world. Yet for all its positive connotations, this authentic relationship is seldom understood as the unproblematic coordination of the self and what lies beyond it. The difference between interiority and exteriority is itself so persistent, that authenticity never takes the form of reconciliation. Rather, for Yourcenar, authenticity designates a paradoxical achievement on man's part, which consists in recognizing, accepting and preserving the separation of self and world.

This thesis proposes to investigate the notion of authenticity and its existential, aesthetic and political parameters in the work of Yourcenar. These three parameters, existence, aesthetics and politics, define key forms of involvement with the world and describe specific ways in which difference manifests itself.

Drawing from the existentialist tradition of the twentieth century, I shall use the term existence to designate the plain fact of being in the world. This definition of existence shall be further clarified (and tested) in my thesis. Nonetheless, it must be stated at the outset that 'existence' denotes an effort to think man in non-essentialist, non-objectivist and non-positivist terms, as an entity with no stable form or content. In her published interviews with Patrick de Rosbo, Yourcenar uses the adjective 'existentiel' in a comparable way. She specifies that in her novel *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (1951),

nous avons enfin un personnage dont je dirais que l'image que finalement nous obtenons de lui est existentielle et non essentielle, pour parler le jargon philosophique de notre temps (autant celui-là qu'un autre), c'est-à-dire que nous avons un individu unique comme nous tous, fait comme nous tous d'éléments fortuits assemblés un peu au hasard, et qu'il s'agit de retrouver dans leur complexité.

Similarly, in the case of Zénon, the main character of her novel *L'Œuvre au noir* (1968), she writes that:

de nouveau j'étais passée d'une réalité poétique, archétypale et aussi, disons-le, conventionnelle, à une réalité existentielle : la réalité d'un individu donné à un moment donné.<sup>1</sup>

While Yourcenar is keen on distancing herself from the existentialists of her time, she employs the distinction between essence and existence to underline the contingency, facticity and spatio-temporal concreteness of two of her main narrative characters. In the sense that Yourcenar gives to the word, and which I also intend to follow in my analysis, existence is inherently differential, because it suffers an incessant change, and refers to the actual or imagined path towards subjectivity and selfhood.

If such concepts as existence, subjectivity and selfhood occupy a prominent place in Yourcenar's *œuvre*, the same cannot be said about politics. Strictly speaking, it is only in two of her novels, *Denier du rêve* (1934, re-written in 1959) and *Mémoires d'Hadrien* that politics, in the everyday sense of the word, plays an important role. Even in these novels, the political as such is not discussed for its own sake, but always supplements the existential, and its meaning depends on the way it shapes, or is shaped by, the narrative characters. However, it is precisely the confluence of the existential and the political in Yourcenar that interests me. As an arrangement of the relationship between, on the one hand, individuals and communities, and on the other, space and time, politics forms an aspect of subjectivity. Whether in the guise of the politicized subject, of the subject of politics,

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick de Rosbo, *Entretiens radiophoniques avec Marguerite Yourcenar* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1972), pp. 66-67.

or of the subject as an agent of politics, the political frequently determines the existential parameters of the narrative.<sup>2</sup> It is certainly present in Yourcenar's historical fiction and affects the development of her characters within the historical settings in which they act.<sup>3</sup> Thus, even if Yourcenar is not consistently preoccupied with politics in her work, the political emerges as the productive relationship between man and world and as an important component of the subject's personal trajectory and identity. As I shall endeavour to show, political subjectivity is also differential. The individual or the community do not simply impose their presence on the world in a linear and authoritative way, but are in a constant state of negotiation with space, tradition and history. Politics is understood, at least in principle, as the acceptance and management of the difference that separates man from the world.

However, it is in the realm of the aesthetic that difference manifests itself the most clearly and the most persistently in the work of Yourcenar. The principal way in which this happens is through the failure of the work of art fully to represent reality. Yourcenar's rich and idiosyncratic art criticism, as well as her numerous references to art – modern or ancient, western or oriental – in her fiction, frequently revolve around the theme of the impossibility of adequately depicting nature or the human body in art. More generally, though, Yourcenar is concerned with art's fundamental tendency to confer stable meanings to things, whereas, for her, meanings are ephemeral, fleeting and historically constituted. In this sense, semantic and semiotic difference does not affect only the visual arts, but every act of representation, whether artistic or literary. Art and literature fail in their programmatic goal to represent reality and experience, insofar as artistic and linguistic representations are motivated by the impulse to originate new stabilizing significations.

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<sup>2</sup> The politicized subject is represented in Yourcenar's work by such radical figures as Marcella in *Denier du rêve*, Rémy in *Souvenirs Pieux* (1974), Mishima in *Mishima ou la vision du vide* (1980); the 'subject of politics' includes Rome in *Mémoires d'Hadrien* and Europe in Yourcenar's essay 'Diagnostic de l'Europe' (1929); and the subject as an agent of politics is best embodied by Hadrien as an emperor, in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Zénon persecuted by the authorities in *L'Œuvre au noir*.

The same is true with regard to other forms of writing, such as philosophy and historiography. While Yourcenar was an ardent student of history and a philosophically-minded writer, she also insisted on the abstract character of philosophical and historical interpretation. For her, philosophers and historians risk conceptualizing experience at least as much as artists, poets and novelists. As we shall see, Yourcenar considers that every act of representation, whether properly aesthetic or not, installs a conceptual distance between a signifier – a work of art, a piece of writing – and a set of factual referents which belong to reality or ‘life’. Precisely because representation is understood as a process of giving form and meaning to what is in itself amorphous and without permanent content, art is the privileged space where difference is the most acutely felt.

As I mentioned above, that which is primarily without stable form or content is human existence itself. If representation in all its guises fails to capture what is changeable and disorderly in the world, then *a fortiori* it fails to convey the unsettled reality of the self and the contingency of experience. This situation complicates all aspects of the effort to understand oneself, because, as I shall be discussing in Chapter 1, representation is the principal way of accessing the self as well as the world. It is the indispensable means of self-knowledge and of cognizance of the world, while at the same time it introduces difference and transforms both the world and the self into objects, concepts and symbols. This problem is central in *Mémoires d’Hadrien*, where the chief issue is to make sense of one’s life, and in *L’Œuvre au noir*, where knowledge of the world is the main stake. In both these novels, the quest for authenticity is to be understood in terms of the struggle to transcend the impasse of representation. In my thesis I shall be using such categories as ‘the aestheticization of experience’, ‘the conceptualization of reality’ and the ‘rhetorical constitution of selfhood’ to refer to the problematic of representation.

The aesthetic or representational character of man’s relationship with the world is even more evident when it comes to politics. I just referred to politics in the

Yourcenarian text as an ‘arrangement’ and a ‘management’ of space and time. Man structures and allocates meaning to the world in such a way that the *polis* is already an aesthetic-political representation. I shall discuss this point in more detail in Chapter 2, with reference to *Mémoires d’Hadrien* and to the cities that Hadrien founds during his reign.<sup>4</sup> As we shall see, the political meets the aesthetic in a fundamental way in this novel. The model for the organization of the state and for the formation of political subjectivity is the work of art. The basic notions of representation, beauty, order and difference are at work in Yourcenar’s definition of both the state and the task of the statesman. It is in this context that I use the term ‘the political aesthetic’ in the title of my thesis. I shall be arguing that, especially in *Mémoires d’Hadrien*, politics emerges as a form of aesthetics, while the political leader is an arch-artist who undertakes to negotiate the impasse of representation.

In this way, the existential and the political parameters constitute aspects of the problematic of aesthetic representation in the work of Marguerite Yourcenar. Existential authenticity and political authenticity are interrelated in as much as they depend on the possibility of authentic representation. If authentic representation were possible, if man’s artistic, literary, etc., creations could indeed convey the variability and multiformity of life, then man would be able to recognize himself existentially and politically in his works. However, following a line of reflection that brings Yourcenar close to Heidegger, as well as to some of his poststructural epigones, she insists that such a representation is beyond our capacity. How is it then that Yourcenar persists in the search for authenticity in her novels and criticism? Before attempting to answer this question in the chapters that follow, I propose to examine briefly here the ways in which Yourcenar employs the term authenticity, and the

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<sup>4</sup> *Mémoires d’Hadrien* is the imaginary memoirs of Roman emperor Hadrian. In my thesis, I shall be using the name ‘Hadrien’, with an ‘e’, to refer to the main character of this novel; in the few cases in which I shall be referring to the Roman emperor (117-138 CE), I shall be writing ‘Hadrian’, with an ‘a’.

various contexts in which it has been used in twentieth century literature and criticism in the West.

Readers of Yourcenar will notice that she does not use the term *authenticité* in the existential and political sense that I am attaching to it in my thesis. This word and its derivatives appear not infrequently in the Yourcenarian text to mean 'genuine', 'proper' or 'exact'. For example, in 'Les Visages de l'Histoire dans l'« Histoire Auguste »' (1962), Yourcenar distinguishes between the dubious authenticity of the *Historia Augusta* as a document (presumably written in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE) and the - equally uncertain - truthfulness and veracity of its content. She argues that modern historians suspect this text of being 'une quasi totale imposture', and then notes: 'L'authenticité est une chose, la véracité en est une autre.'<sup>5</sup> Authenticity is here understood in the sense of correct attribution to an author. The distinction between *authenticité*, as the truth of the object, and *vérité*, as the truth of its content, is, of course, fundamental to philology and to artistic connoisseurship. Both authenticity and veracity are understood in this context as forms of correspondence. Veracity clearly involves a correspondence between the actual facts, e.g. the historical facts mentioned in *Historia Augusta*, and their narrative exposition. But authenticity is also a form of correspondence. As Geoffrey Hartman notes, 'the authenticity of the artist matters as a guarantee of a direct correspondence between the mind of the maker and the attributed work'.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, authenticity denotes an undisputed correspondence and continuity between author and work, and it is opposed to artificiality and forgery.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *EM*, p. 6. 'Les Visages de l'histoire dans l'« Histoire Auguste »', is included in Yourcenar's collection of essays *Sous bénéfice d'inventaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962).

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartmann, *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle against Inauthenticity* (New York: Macmillan, 2002), p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> In her essay 'Le Chaînon manquant de l'écriture', May Chehab discusses the same passage from Yourcenar's 'Les Visages de l'histoire' and hints at the idea of authenticity as a form of correspondence. In May Chehab, 'Le Chaînon manquant de l'écriture', in (ed.), *Marguerite Yourcenar entre littérature et science* (Clermont-Ferrand: SIEY, 2007), pp. 157-174, (pp. 172-73).

We find this understanding of authenticity in other parts of Yourcenar's work. In the 'Carnets de notes de *Mémoires d'Hadrien*' (written in 1952), a series of fragmentary reflections on the composition of this novel, Yourcenar complains about the loss of authenticity suffered by the ruins of the Villa Adriana, emperor Hadrian's final residence in Tivoli, as a result of bad restoration. 'La moindre restauration imprudente infligée aux pierres, la moindre route macadamisée entamant un champ où l'herbe croissait en paix depuis des siècles, créent à jamais l'irréparable. La beauté s'éloigne ; l'authenticité aussi.'<sup>8</sup> In this passage, authenticity has again the meaning of continuity between an original and its current form. Authenticity is also associated with beauty, implying that the correspondence between the original artefact and its ruins is what makes it beautiful for us today.

Nevertheless, continuity and correspondence between the authentic object and its origin are not linear and unproblematic. In her essay 'Voyages dans l'espace et voyages dans le temps' (1982), Yourcenar refers to the process of abstraction to which the contemporary visitor to ancient monuments has to take recourse in order to visualize them as they originally stood. For example, she argues that the protective rope surrounding Stonehenge 'nous empêche efficacement de faire un saut de trente siècles'. Then she makes an extraordinary statement about the authenticity of the Parthenon in Athens:

Pour voir le Parthénon, comme l'ont vu non seulement Périclès, qui le connut surchargé d'ornements multicolores et de boucliers d'or qui nous gêneraient sans doute la pureté de son architecture, ou Byron, qui le vit authentiquement en ruine, mais encore nous-mêmes il y a une trentaine d'années, il faut éliminer en pensée la pollution d'Athènes.<sup>9</sup>

According to Yourcenar, it is not Pericles, its commissioner, but Byron who saw Parthenon in its authentic form, that is, 'authentiquement en ruine'. For her,

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<sup>8</sup> *OR*, p. 540.

<sup>9</sup> This and the previous quotation, *EM*, p. 699. 'Voyages dans l'espace et voyages dans le temps' was included in Yourcenar's posthumous collection of essays, *Le Tour de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).



authenticity is a quality pertaining to the ruin, in its purity, simplicity and suggestiveness. The authentic ruin is continuous with its origin, the ancient temple, in a paradoxical and troublesome fashion: not only is this continuity difficult to discern through the pollution of the modern city, but the origin to which the ruin corresponds is, we are told, inauthentic and impure. It follows that, for Yourcenar, authenticity and originality are two distinct concepts. Authenticity is a quality which remains hidden and which reveals itself to the observer once a process of almost random transformations occurs (e.g. transformations effected in time).

The word *authenticité* is used by Yourcenar in an analogous way with reference to concepts and ideas. In a footnote to her essay on the poet Constantin Cavafy, Yourcenar distinguishes between authentic and inauthentic Hellenism. 'Il importe pourtant de distinguer chez [Cavafy] entre les belles pièces d'un hellénisme authentique, et celles où il lui arrive de céder à un goût [...] pour une Grèce d'étagère'.<sup>10</sup> Authenticity is again considered as a quality which remains hidden, although it is available to those – artists or spectators, writers or readers – who look for it. At a different point in this essay, Yourcenar is even more explicit as regards the hidden character of authenticity. Discussing Cavafy's mysticism, she observes that it never transforms into linguistic and literary hermeticism; then she adds a footnote in which she remarks: 'C'est ce qui lui donne son étrange caractère d'ésotérisme authentique, c'est-à-dire bien caché.'<sup>11</sup> Cavafy's esotericism remains hidden behind the clarity of expression and the neatness of poetic form. This is what makes it authentic.

From this discussion, a pattern begins to emerge as to the way Yourcenar understands and uses the word *authenticité* and its derivatives. Authenticity is opposed to the artificial and the pastiche. It implies a continuity with an origin, but

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<sup>10</sup> *EM*, p. 138. From 'Présentation critique de Constantin Cavafy' (written 1939, revised 1953), an essay included in *Sous bénéfice d'inventaire*.

<sup>11</sup> *EM*, p. 158n.

this continuity is not untroubled. The authentic tends to blend with the inauthentic or to remain concealed behind it. Thus, when we read in the work of Yourcenar that an object or an idea is 'authentic', we are not in the presence of something 'original'. On the contrary, Yourcenar suggests that we are at a distance from the self-sufficiency of the original object or idea, while the 'authentic' is in fact an authentic *representation*. Even before its tasteless restoration, the Villa Adriana was not identical to the original Villa built by Hadrian, but a set of 'authentic' ruins. Similarly, in the realm of ideas, Cavafy cannot express his Hellenism and esotericism in an immediate manner; he has to re-iterate these original notions cautiously, to re-present them in such a way that their meaning does not figure autonomously or plainly in his poetry. His Hellenism is a poetical transformation of the original, plain idea of Hellenism. Finally, Yourcenar goes as far as to suggest that the origin with which authentic representations are associated may not actually exist. If, in antiquity, the Parthenon was burdened with needless embellishments, it is Byron who saw it 'authentiquement en ruine'. The original to which Byron's Parthenon corresponds exists only in our imagination.

The difference between originality and authenticity is crucial for Yourcenar, as it is for my study. If the terms authenticity and inauthenticity pertain principally to representations, then it is also true that they describe two forms of difference from an origin. Authentic difference is exemplified by the untouched ruins (such as Yourcenar saw them in Piranesi's etchings, for instance), while inauthentic difference is exemplified by the artificial and the pastiche.<sup>12</sup> It is therefore not an exaggeration to claim that Yourcenar's artistic, literary and cultural criticism constitutes a tireless search for authentic representations. Her work in general can be considered as an effort to distinguish between the authentic and the artificial, and as an exploration of the obscure ways in which the authentic differs from a hypothetical origin.

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<sup>12</sup> I am referring here to Yourcenar's essay 'Le Cerveau noir de Piranèse' (1959-1961), in *Sous bénéfice d'inventaire*.

Following Yourcenar, in this thesis, I employ the term ‘authenticity’ principally as an aesthetic term which implies simultaneously a continuity with, and a difference from, an origin. Nonetheless, my interest is not primarily in artistic authenticity, but in the possibility of authentic existence and authentic politics as they emerge in Yourcenar’s writings. The criterion of authenticity applies both to existence and to politics: each is thoroughly affected by the problematic of representation.

Occasionally, Yourcenar comes close to associating explicitly the idea of authenticity with the question of existence. For example in *Les Yeux ouverts*, her book of interviews with Matthieu Galey, she expresses her opinion on the recreational use of drugs as follows: ‘Je suis contre tout ce qui est artificiel. Je trouve que l’esprit doit agir d’après soi-même, d’après ses propres lois, sans béquilles et en tout cas sans échasses.’<sup>13</sup> It is significant that Yourcenar locates the problem in the artificiality of the experience that drugs incite. She aestheticizes the issue of drugs, by suggesting that this experience is fake, inauthentic. More generally, though, it must be recognized that she did not use the term *authenticité* to define existential self-fulfilment and self-realization.

The reason for this may be that Yourcenar kept herself consciously at a distance from the existentialist tradition of the twentieth century. I discuss this topic in more detail in Chapter 4, with reference to Heidegger’s existentialism. However, the ideal of authentic selfhood has been central to philosophy long before European existentialism. Marshall Berman locates the beginning of the search for authenticity at the dawn of the Christian era, which, let us not forget, is also the historical setting of *Mémoires d’Hadrien*. Berman argues that it was after the disintegration of the Platonic *polis*, albeit after a gap of several centuries, that man looked for ways to affirm his individuality:

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<sup>13</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar, *Les Yeux ouverts: Entretiens avec Matthieu Galey* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1980), p. 112.

It was only long after the disintegration of this ancient *polis* that the basis of personal identity was questioned systematically and the search for authenticity was formally begun. The Stoics of Nero's age found themselves in a world governed by chance, contingency and arbitrary power [...]. Personal identity had to be fought for and wrested from such a world.<sup>14</sup>

The search for authenticity is associated by Berman with the beginnings of individualism and the formation of individual political identity. Berman goes on to document the re-emergence of the quest of authenticity in Montesquieu and Rousseau, while trying to put forth a new-Leftist agenda for the achievement of authentic morality and citizenship.

Both these aspects, the moral and the political, stress the interplay between the individual and the community which characterizes the concept of authenticity, as we still understand it today. In as much as the call for authenticity is also the call for self-realization, the individual finds herself opposed to social norms and moral demands. In his book *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor gives the individualistic interpretation of authenticity:

Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own. This is the background understanding to the modern ideal of authenticity and to the goals of self-fulfilment or self-realization in which it is usually couched.<sup>15</sup>

Taylor recognizes the political and social dangers involved in this interpretation, and dismisses the resulting instrumentalism and 'the culture of narcissism' from which, he thinks, modernity and postmodernity suffer.<sup>16</sup> However, he suggests that we can resist further fragmentation, both internal and societal, and understand authenticity in an intersubjective or 'dialogical' context.<sup>17</sup> He proposes that we should rethink

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<sup>14</sup> Marshall Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), p. xx. In Chapter 2 of my thesis, I shall investigate the ways in which Hadrien attempts to differentiate his approach to authenticity from that of his contemporary Stoics.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> See Taylor, p. 55.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, p. 33.

authenticity as a normative ideal involving ‘creation and construction as well as discovery’, ‘originality’, and ‘self-definition in dialogue’.<sup>18</sup>

The normative and intersubjective characteristics of authenticity have been emphasized more recently by Alessandro Ferrara in his 1998 book, *Reflective Authenticity: Rethinking the Project of Modernity*. He claims that

the category of authenticity, broadly understood as the congruity of the self or of a collective identity with itself – *a congruity not reducible to consistency* – [...] can help us to account even better than autonomy and difference for what it is that cultural rights, multiculturalism and the right to privacy are meant to protect, for what we understand today by human dignity.<sup>19</sup>

Ferrara’s argument is too refined to summarize here, but it may be read as an effort to re-institute a universal horizon of reference which is ‘appropriate to a postmetaphysical standpoint’.<sup>20</sup> What I would like to stress at this point is that Ferrara’s definition of authenticity relies on a principle of congruity which is not reducible to consistency. This definition is close to Yourcenar’s perception of authenticity. As I discussed above, she understands authenticity in terms of a troubled continuity with an origin. Authenticity is, for her, a criterion for assessing representations on the basis of an aesthetic model. The same applies to Ferrara’s concept of authenticity.<sup>21</sup>

This aesthetic approach to authenticity is amply used by the existentialist philosophers, according to Jacob Golomb. In his book *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus*, he examines the development of the notion of authenticity in five existentialist philosophers, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre and Camus, and finds that at least the last four understand this notion in terms of ‘the authentic individual who individualizes and creates himself. In this act of

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<sup>18</sup> Taylor, p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> Alessandro Ferrara, *Reflective Authenticity: Rethinking the Project of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 52, my emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> Ferrara, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Ferrara, p. 10, where he writes of ‘the well-formed work of art’ as a model for authenticity.

creation, creator and creation merge.’<sup>22</sup> Man forms himself existentially as a work of art.

Golomb argues that ‘authenticity defines itself as lacking any definition’. All the same, a few paragraphs further down, Golomb offers a definition of authenticity as ‘the authentic response of being true to the project of forming one’s own self, which entails reluctance to conform to any existential “is” or “ought” or to seek some transcendental “ought”’.<sup>23</sup> This passage implies that authenticity is a possibility of the self that transcends ethics, conceptuality and difference. For Golomb, to be authentic means to produce a full and solid representation of oneself that leaves no part of oneself unaccounted for. Writing on Sartre’s aesthetic model of authenticity in *La Nausée*, Golomb remarks:

Sartre’s conclusion is that one is ‘saved’ by music, more generally, by art. In creating one’s self, one may become both a genuine artist and a work of art. By becoming and living like a ‘saxophone note’, like a ‘melody’, one can achieve ‘justification of one’s existence’. The metaphor of music and the aesthetic model of authenticity transform this gloomy and nauseating novel into an optimistic literary manifesto of the viability of the search for authenticity within the anonymous crowd.<sup>24</sup>

The idea of redemption through the stability, fullness and meaningfulness of a single note suggests that the existentialist model of authenticity, as Golomb perceives it, is linear, harmonious and self-sufficient. This model is very far indeed from Yourcenar’s understanding of authenticity as a troubled and differential continuity with an uncertain origin. While both Golomb and Yourcenar employ aesthetic models of authenticity, Golomb’s model stresses the hope of absolute self-creation, while Yourcenar’s model underlines the impossibility of total representation.

I cannot examine the different existentialist approaches to authenticity in further detail here, but I shall be comparing Heidegger’s analysis of authentic being with

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<sup>22</sup> Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 71. The quotation refers specifically to Nietzsche’s concept of authenticity in *The Birth of Tragedy*, but it describes succinctly the aesthetic approach to existential authenticity in general.

<sup>23</sup> Golomb, p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> Golomb, p. 145-146. The quotations within the quotation are from Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. by R. Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982).

Yourcenar's perception of authenticity in Chapters 4 and 5. One of my arguments will be that, for both Yourcenar and Heidegger, the concepts of unity, identity and authenticity are equally complex and problematic. Not only does Yourcenar's approach to authenticity have little in common with such one-dimensional aesthetic models as Taylor's and Golomb's, but it challenges the metaphysics underpinning the very concepts of 'creating' and 'constructing'.

To give but one example here, in her introduction to her play *Qui n'a pas son Minotaure* ?, Yourcenar explains that she re-wrote this work several times over a period of thirty years, experimenting with different operatic, comedic, grotesque and farcical representations of the central character, Thésée. Then she links the gradual and fragmentary creation of the figure of Thésée with that of her more famous character, Hadrien.

Quelques années plus tard, j'allais essayer de décrire dans Hadrien un homme qui peu à peu se construit à l'aide de ses actes et du même coup organise un monde. Je crois bien que je n'aurais pas réussi à en donner même l'idée la plus inadéquate, si je n'avais pas d'abord tenté cette entreprise de comique désintégration.<sup>25</sup>

Yourcenar wants us to know that it was the *disintegration* of the character of Thésée which allowed for the narrative *re-constitution* of the character of Hadrien. Although an aesthetic model of existential and political self-authentication is followed in *Mémoires* ('un homme qui [...] se construit et [...] organise un monde'), this model is not spontaneous or undisturbed. It provides for the conscious deconstruction of the narrative subject, and for its subsequent reconstruction on the basis of individual fragments. At a narrative level, the figure of Hadrien is authenticated by virtue of its being explicitly a repetition of fragments rather than an original unified creation of the author's mind. This point will be developed further in Chapter 3.

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<sup>25</sup> Introduction to *Qui n'a pas son Minotaure* ?, in Marguerite Yourcenar, *Théâtre*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), II, p. 179. This play was first published in Marguerite Yourcenar, *Le mystère d'Alceste, suivi de: Qui n'a pas son Minotaure*, (Paris: Plon, 1963).

Can we therefore argue that Yourcenar was a step ahead of her time in terms of how she understood and attempted to ensure the authenticity of her novels and narrative characters? In one sense, this is not true, since novelists have always looked for innovative ways to ensure authenticity in their work. A prime example is Stendhal who, as Ann Jefferson argues, uses realism, repetition and, more scandalously, plagiarism, in a way that heightens the authenticity of the narrative. With reference to realism, Jefferson remarks that, for Stendhal, ‘the proper use of language requires the same “naturel” that is indispensable to authentic forms of passion’.<sup>26</sup> The implication is that the expression of true passion requires conventional narrative means. ‘But if passion, where the demands of authenticity are just as great as they are in fiction, if passion can accommodate and even flourish on a repetition of the already written, then what about the novel?’<sup>27</sup> Jefferson maintains that it is not originality or repetition as such that assert the authenticity of the novel. ‘The important thing is that [...] there is a deliberate sounding of more than one voice, and a careful positioning of the desired reader to enable her to hear all the voices at work in the texts.’<sup>28</sup> While I agree with Jefferson that ‘repetition in itself is neither positive nor negative, neither vulgar nor sublime’, I shall be arguing that, by foregrounding the instance of repetition, Yourcenar attempts to revive the cause of authenticity, narrative or otherwise.<sup>29</sup> I shall also re-examine the issue of realism and whether it precludes or, on the contrary, helps to affirm the possibility of authenticity in writing. In any case, it is safe to conclude that Yourcenar does not stand out among other writers specifically for problematizing the issue of narrative authenticity in her novels.

Rather, I believe that the singularity of Yourcenar’s approach becomes manifest when examined in the specific literary and cultural context in which it is inscribed. On the one hand, she attempts to narrate the struggle for authenticity, while avoiding

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<sup>26</sup> Ann Jefferson, *Reading Realism in Stendhal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 93.

<sup>27</sup> Jefferson, p. 217.

<sup>28</sup> Jefferson, p. 217.

<sup>29</sup> Jefferson, p. 217.



the existentialist tendency of using fiction to illustrate a philosophical point. On the other hand, she thematizes the problematic of authenticity in narrative but, unlike her contemporary *nouveau-romanciers*, she sees the novel primarily as 'the writing of adventure', rather than 'the adventure of writing'. I am borrowing these phrases from Françoise van Rossum-Guyon, who writes:

En s'affirmant comme aventure d'une écriture au lieu de l'écriture d'une aventure [...], en passant de l'autoreprésentation à l'antireprésentation, le Nouveau Roman [...] se constitue en théorie du roman puisqu'il met à nu sa condition de possibilité selon laquelle c'est la narration qui constitue la fiction et non l'inverse.<sup>30</sup>

For Yourcenar, focusing on *écriture* as such does not teach us anything new about the representational character of either writing or experience. It is not necessarily the breaking of textual 'continuity', but the *mise-en-scène* and the practice itself of writing which show the 'theoretical' and therefore artful and artificial character of the novel. As Michel de Certeau has stressed with reference to Freud's not unconventional 'roman familial' *Moses and Monotheism*, '*La pratique productrice du texte est la théorie*'.<sup>31</sup> The text contains and narrates the theory that makes it possible. In Chapter 1, I shall argue further that, for Yourcenar, it is through the rigorous use and inevitable failure of realism that the limits of representation become visible. Authenticity arises paradoxically on the limits of realist narrative as that obscure truth of the self that does not lend itself to representation.

In this sense, already with *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, Yourcenar enters into a dialogue with the critique of authenticity and representation which is a key aspect of the postmodern theory of writing (and) the self. In her *Poetics of Postmodernism*,

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<sup>30</sup> Françoise van Rossum-Guyon, 'Le Nouveau Roman comme critique du roman', in Jean Ricardou and F. Rossum-Guyon (eds), *Nouveau roman : hier, aujourd'hui* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1974), pp. 215-254, (p. 229).

<sup>31</sup> Michel de Certeau, *L'Écriture de l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 339. 'Roman familial' is how de Certeau describes Freud's 1939 historico-psychoanalytical study *Moses and Monotheism*. De Certeau italicizes the phrases quoted here to stress that ideas and concepts can be articulated more convincingly through the rhetorical processes and semiotic structures which constitute the text, rather than through the analytical language of science, historiography, criticism and so on. I am not using this argument against the *nouveau roman*, but I believe it is even better illustrated by realist narrative such as Yourcenar's.

Linda Hutcheon sums up this critique in terms of the decentring of the subject in literature as in thought:

In postmodern psychoanalytic, philosophical and literary theory, the further decentring of the subject and its pursuit of individuality and authenticity has had significant repercussions on everything from our concepts of rationality to our view of the possibilities of genre. [...] The move to rethink margins and borders is clearly a move away from centralization with its associated concerns of origin, oneness and monumentality that work to link the concept of the center to those of the eternal and universal. The local, the regional, the non-totalizing are re-asserted as the center becomes a fiction – necessary, desired, but a fiction nonetheless.<sup>32</sup>

Following Hutcheon's claim, emphasis on the periphery works to challenge the autonomy of the centre and therefore to delegitimize the struggle for existential, political and narrative authenticity. As we shall see, Yourcenar's pre-emptive answer is that, even in the traditional context of literary realism, the subject has never been an autonomous entity preoccupied with consolidating its centrality, but has always constituted itself in dislocation, with no 'place' to call its own. Because the subject has no place, it has never been possible to focus on it, whatever the reservations with regard to the realist novel in postmodernist thought. On the contrary, as I shall discuss in Chapter 1, realism is seen by Yourcenar as a technique of focusing on the trivial, the phenomenal and the repetitive, with an aim of closing in on the shifting and obscure area of the subject, without even attempting to represent it centrally. Furthermore, while Yourcenar would readily agree that the systematic discourses of science and ideology often presume the presence of the subject, she would also add that the way to deconstruct these discourses is not necessarily by consciously dismantling the narrative and decentring the subject. One cannot decentre what is already decentred. My reading of Yourcenar will suggest that, for her at the very least, the purportedly solid and unitary context to which the realist novel is said to

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<sup>32</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 58.

appeal lends itself excellently to demonstrating the constitutive dislocation of the subject.

By explicitly recognizing this state of affairs Yourcenar's characters claim their authenticity. Recognition does not restore the stability of the self, but situates it in the interplay between purity and impurity, between the desire for order and the certainty of disorder. In this sense, for Yourcenar, authenticity does not consist in a dialectical transcendence of irony, but in accepting what I shall designate, following Heidegger, as the facticity of the self, that is, the fact that the self always exists in a concrete and finite spatio-temporality that refuses synthesis and redemption. Authenticity emerges in Yourcenar's fiction as the acceptance of the self's constitutive inauthenticity or, better, as the swinging back and forth between revolt and acceptance, between the impulse to create something original and the knowledge that pure creativity is beyond our capacities. I believe that this dramatic oscillation between extreme existential states is described in *Mémoires d'Hadrien* more explicitly, intensely and convincingly than in any other work by Yourcenar. This is one of the reasons why I shall be reading this novel more closely than the rest of Yourcenar's literature. My study will also engage, nonetheless, with the rest of Yourcenar's fiction especially after the Second World War, as well as with her literary and artistic criticism. I shall not, with some exceptions, focus on Yourcenar's autobiography and theatre, for reasons of space, and because this would require different critical and interpretative approaches.

Yourcenar is not alone in suggesting that authenticity is not a synonym of purity, but involves the ability to understand what is at stake in the opposition between purity and impurity. The purity/impurity dichotomy has been a central issue in twentieth-century art, as Mozaffar Qizilbash discusses in a 1998 essay with the title 'Impurity, Authenticity, Humanity'.<sup>33</sup> Qizilbash asks: 'Is it distinctively, even

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<sup>33</sup> Mozaffar Qizilbash, 'Impurity, Authenticity, Humanity', in *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, Volume 3, No 1 (Oxford: Carfax, 1998), pp. 1-7.

authentically, human to be, in some sense, impure?'.<sup>34</sup> He compares the work of Mondrian with that of Pollock, and concludes that, with regard to 'the pure/impure opposition, Mondrian was the foremost purist in abstract painting and Jackson Pollock's work is exemplary of the impure'.<sup>35</sup> Can we therefore claim that Pollock represents the 'human' more truthfully than Mondrian, asks Qizilbash. Or is the opposite also arguable, namely, that Mondrian expresses a very human desire for purity, while Pollock offers a demonic, almost inhuman, representation of impurity? Drawing from the work of another abstract painter, Barnett Newman, and reflecting on the 'imprecisions' and 'imperfections' of his paintings, Qizilbash concludes that 'the impure is not simply human, nor the pure inhuman. Rather, [...] it is in the opposition between the pure and the impure that the human shows itself.' Further down, he stresses again that 'it is [...] in the interplay between the pure and the impure that the human emerges'.<sup>36</sup> In Newman's paintings, as in Yourcenar's narrative, authenticity is understood as the drama of impurity over the background of the quest for purity.

At this point, however, a risk emerges, and it is one which I think was not fully taken into account in Yourcenar's thinking of authenticity. In inverting the meaning of authenticity, so as to reckon with the fundamental inauthenticity of the self, one might be tempted to imagine a new universal form of subjectivity whose characteristic is precisely its instability and decentredness. If impurity is a constitutive aspect of being human, then one might surmise that humanity can finally be defined on the basis of its infirmity and inauthenticity. In this sense, self-realization would lead to the creation of a new identity which, although based on the acknowledgement of fleetingness and contingency, would itself be ontologically self-sufficient and secure. It would be a new, negative essence. I believe that this

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<sup>34</sup> Qizilbash, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Qizilbash, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Qizilbash, p. 3.

unacknowledged risk lurks in Qizilbash's perception of what it means to be human. Humanity is depicted by him as a new universal referent. I also believe that this danger is present in Yourcenar's writing, and especially in her determination of political authenticity.

Political authenticity constitutes one of the structural themes of *Mémoires d'Hadrien* – and this is the other reason why I have chosen to focus mostly on this novel. As we shall see, the issue of political authenticity has a double reference. Firstly, it concerns the political identity of the community over which Hadrien rules, namely the Roman Empire. Secondly, it refers to the political identity of the community which Yourcenar addresses in principle, namely Europe in the wake of the Second World War. These two communities, with Hadrien as the exemplary leader and arch-artist, constitute two political subjects that are distinct in time, but which share the same space, history and, as I shall argue in Chapter 5, the same geopolitics and 'geopoetics'.

In *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, both the individual and the political subjects follow the same aesthetic model of self-authentication. Just as Hadrien - the individual subject - constructs himself as an artefact made of pre-existing fragments, so the empire - the political subject – is organized as a work of art, assimilating and promoting its own history. Yourcenar clearly hopes that the search for political authenticity in *Mémoires* will resonate with her contemporary European readers. The novel's phenomenal success in the 1950's suggests that she was justified in that hope.

Yet the transition from the individual to the political and from the existential to the historical is not so smooth. While, to a certain extent, *Mémoires d'Hadrien* avoids reducing individual existence to a stable identity with immutable characteristics, the empire is ultimately defined as a entity with a fixed historical and political content. Put differently, while from an existential viewpoint, the figure of Hadrien maintains its idiosyncrasy and corresponds only to itself, from a political

perspective, the empire and, by inference, 'Europe', acquire a universal meaning that exceeds their factual limits. They become pure identities.

The reason for this is, I believe, that the political subject (the 'empire', 'Europe') is given a concrete geopolitical space in the novel, despite Yourcenar's insistence that the subject is fleeting, mysteriously drifting away from its expected course, and never inhabiting its 'proper' space. The political subject ceases to be a differential representation, and becomes a symbol with a concrete referent. Europe and Rome become signifiers of 'humanity', 'beauty' and 'freedom', ideals which draw their validity from Greece, and in the process exclude other forms of subjectivity which do not have the same character of universality. In the last chapter of my thesis, I shall be examining some of the strategies of exclusion deployed in *Mémoires* by looking into Hadrien's relationship with his silent lover, Antinoüs, and into Hadrien's aggressive wars against the Jews. Overall, there is room to argue that politics in *Mémoires* is anchored in the idea of the universality of Greece, and that Greek aesthetic thought constitutes the missing space of the subject. In this way, the political articulation of authenticity in *Mémoires* will be shown to preserve those very traditional essentialist and metaphysical determinations which the individual subject of this novel struggles to shake off.

Although the last chapter of my thesis will be dedicated to the issue of political aestheticism and the exclusion of otherness in *Mémoires*, my concern overall is not to be critical of Yourcenar. Nor do I seek, in the first four chapters, to 'reclaim' Yourcenar for postmodernity. In addition to studying the adventures of the notion of authenticity in general, I am interested in helping to establish the specifically modern character of Yourcenar's fiction, criticism and thought. For that purpose, I will be reading her work in the light of the analyses of authenticity by Benjamin and Heidegger, two different, but in certain ways compatible, thinkers of modernity. In

my investigation, I shall also be consulting selected studies on political and philosophical modernity by de Man, Lacoue-Labarthe and Lyotard.

Of these thinkers, it is with Martin Heidegger's existentialism that Yourcenar's thought on subjectivity, existence and authenticity can be compared the most fruitfully. This might come as a surprise, given these two writers' manifestly different styles of writing, and also their seemingly diverging attitudes towards a number of individual themes. Yourcenar's balanced, 'readerly' narrative contrasts sharply with Heidegger's unruly poetical-philosophical prose. Moreover, Yourcenar's fiction, however inclined to philosophical meditation, has little to offer by way of rigorous analysis and conclusive statements. From a different perspective, Yourcenar's work bears the stamp of cosmopolitanism; it opens itself to a variety of traditions, cultures, languages, arts and literatures, old and new alike. Conversely, Heidegger's life and philosophical attitude seem provincial, almost oblivious of anything that is not related to his Greco-Germanic references, and suggestively rooted in the land around Freiburg which he rarely left.<sup>37</sup>

Yet these differences are not so extreme as they initially appear. Yourcenar's cosmopolitanism seems less assured when considered from the vantage point of 'Diagnostic de l'Europe', one of her early and most conservative essays, as I shall discuss in Chapter 3. On the other hand, Heidegger is the philosopher who taught us about the homelessness of Being – a notion close to the dislocated subject to which I referred above. There is an element of irony in calling 'provincial' a philosopher deeply concerned with the ideas of exile and wandering. As Derrida writes, 'comment accuser cette pensée [i.e. la pensée de Heidegger] de l'errance

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<sup>37</sup> See Adorno's critique of Heidegger's provincialism, in Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. by Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (London: Routledge, 1986), especially pp. 53-57. Adorno stresses the 'falsity of rootedness' in Heidegger (p. 57). With reference to a 1933 radio broadcast by Heidegger, entitled 'Why Do We Stay in the Provinces', Adorno observes that 'With wily strategy [Heidegger] disarms the charge that he is provincial; he uses the term "provincialism" in a positive sense' (p. 53). See Martin Heidegger, 'Creative Landscape: Why Do We Stay in the Provinces', in Anton Kaes *et al.* (eds), *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 426-428.

interminable d'être un nouveau paganisme du Lieu, un culte complaisant du Sédentaire ? La requête du Lieu et de la Terre n'a rien ici [...] du provincialisme ou du particularisme.'<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, it may be argued that Yourcenar's philosophically minded literature reflects, rather than resists, Heidegger's literary-minded philosophy.

In my analysis, I shall attempt to trace the similarities between Yourcenar's and Heidegger's approaches to existence and subjectivity. I shall place especial emphasis on their respective accounts of the non-conceptual unity between man, space and time. I shall also argue that both Heidegger and Yourcenar encourage us to think unity in terms of difference rather than identity. For both thinkers, unity rests, paradoxically, on accepting the difference that separates man from the world, and refuses harmony and identification. Self-authentication will thus be distinguished from the simplistic view of the existentialist project of creating a 'meaning' for one's life. Rather, authenticity will be associated with the constant repetition of previous fragments of meaning, and with the perpetual re-assertion of difference.

In a more critical spirit, I shall point out that Yourcenar's and Heidegger's respective accounts of subjectivity are equally affected by the risk of universality. As I discussed above, this is the risk involved in stabilizing the site of the subject by considering impurity and differentiability as the subject's immutable and universal characteristics. I shall argue that, like Yourcenar, Heidegger also looked in Greek poetics and aesthetics to find a universal site for the subject, and suggested that it was possible to implement a Greek-inspired aesthetic model of authenticity in modernity. While for Yourcenar this model serves to create a new political identity for post-war Europe, in Heidegger's political thought, this model is used to inspire a new political identity for pre-war Germany. This discussion will eventually refer to Heidegger's involvement with the Nazi party in the 1930's, and to the way this involvement is

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<sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Violence et métaphysique', *L'Écriture et la différence* (Seuil: Paris, 1967), pp. 213-14.



linked with his philosophy. I will suggest that the same perception of political authenticity underpins Yourcenar's and Heidegger's political thought, despite the fact that Yourcenar's approach was much less radical as a result of the then recent war.

Yourcenar's existential and political thought will thus be associated with political modernity, albeit with its darker side. Unlike some of Yourcenar's most vociferous critics, I shall not be quick to decry her putative 'collaborationist strategy', nor shall I consider at length here charges of anti-Semitism which, I believe, do not do justice to the complexity of her thought.<sup>39</sup> Still, I shall raise the issue of the representation of the Jews in *Mémoires*, not to point out the presence of racial prejudice in Yourcenar's writings – I do not think there is any –, but to show how her thought is allied to an understanding of subjectivity and authenticity which also makes racism and fascism possible. I will suggest that this is not a particularity of Yourcenar's or Heidegger's thought, but a sign of a specific strand in political modernity which of course both authors chose to follow. Especially with regard to Yourcenar, I wish to examine how the simultaneous quest for authenticity *and* exemplarity, for uniqueness *and* universality, expresses itself in her work as a particular feature of modernity. Yourcenar's work will thus appear to be rooted in modernity not only in that it opens itself to a series of new and radical questions, including those of subjectivity and representation, but also in that it seems to exclude certain forms of alterity which modernity, in some of its guises, refuses to think.

Paradoxically, studies investigating the presence of modernity in Yourcenar's work are scarce. This suggests that Yourcenar's tactics of keeping equal distance

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<sup>39</sup> In his essay 'Coup de Grâce as Male Fantasy: On the Sexual Politics of Fascism', Michael Rothberg writes suggestively of 'Yourcenar's "collaborationist strategy"' (p. 141), but fails, in my opinion, to provide any evidence, literary or otherwise, supporting his claim. This essay is in J. H. Sarnecki and I. Majer O'Sickey (eds), *Subversive Subjects: Reading Marguerite Yourcenar* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), pp. 125-147. Elaine Marks castigates Yourcenar's 'antisemitism, racism, classism' (p. 86), in her chapter on Yourcenar, entitled "'Getting Away with Murd(h)er", Author's Preface and Narrator's Text: Reading Marguerite Yourcenar's *Coup de grâce* "after Auschwitz"', in Elaine Marks, *Marrano as Metaphor: The Jewish Presence in French Writing* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), pp. 85-95.

from most literary, philosophical and cultural movements of her time has so far been successful. As Margaret Elisabeth Colvin wrote not long ago,

while in recent years there has been a steady output of excellent critical studies, recordings from numerous colloquiums, and so on, all attesting to the interest [Yourcenar's] work continues to evoke, most of these critics' themes tend to reinforce her classicism: ethics, history, and universality, to cite only three. Yet strikingly few studies in recent years have extensively or deeply questioned cultural biases or probed other premises upon which her reputation rests.<sup>40</sup>

Colvin's assessment is especially valid with respect to the dearth of studies aiming to contextualize Yourcenar's corpus in terms of the historical, political and cultural conjuncture at which it was produced.

To be sure, there have been sporadic efforts to assert Yourcenar's literary modernism or even postmodernism. For instance, in a 1993 essay entitled 'Yourcenar postmoderne ?', Luc Rasson compares the lack of any sense of finality in Yourcenar's novel *Un homme obscur* (1982) with what he perceives to be 'l'indifférence "postmoderne"'.<sup>41</sup> Catherine Golieth, on the other hand, identifies distinct features of literary and artistic modernity, including fragmentariness, self-referentiality, loss of meaning, lack of closure and the quest for being-in-itself, in the key metaphor of alchemy in *L'Œuvre au noir*. Golieth argues that alchemy emerges in this novel as the absolutely modern art. She writes that 'l'alchimie aurait réalisé en acte ce que les poètes "modernes" n'ont que pensé'.<sup>42</sup> Finally, Colvin also discusses Yourcenar's modernism in an extremely perceptive fashion. She writes that 'Yourcenar was undeniably a modernist writer in some respects: for example, in certain earlier works' use of avant-garde expressionism, of myth, and of a "classical"

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<sup>40</sup> Margaret Elisabeth Colvin, *Baroque Fictions: Revisioning the Classical in Marguerite Yourcenar* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), p. 13. Recent critical approaches to Yourcenar's work and persona tend to come from the areas of feminist criticism and psychoanalysis. Such works include Pascal Doré, *Yourcenar ou le féminin insoutenable* (Genève: Droz, 1999); Carole Allamand, *Marguerite Yourcenar ou l'écriture en mal de mère* (Paris: Imago 2004); and J. H. Sarnecki and I. Majer O'Sickey (eds), *Subversive Subjects*, to which I referred in the previous note.

<sup>41</sup> Luc Rasson, 'Yourcenar postmoderne ?', in *Bulletin de la Société Internationale d'Études Yourcenariennes*, No 12, Tours, December 1993, pp. 1-6, (p. 6).

<sup>42</sup> Catherine Golieth, 'Au sujet de la modernité de *L'Œuvre au noir*', in *Bulletin de la Société Internationale d'Études Yourcenariennes*, No 20, Tours, December 1999, pp. 123-141, (p. 136).

style imitating the *récit gidién*'.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, Colvin stresses the 'numerous contradictions' in the work of Yourcenar who, despite her modernism, '*appeared* to follow an almost reactionary trend in literature'.<sup>44</sup> These contradictions refer to the simultaneous instance of classical and modern themes in the work of Yourcenar, such as unity *and* plurality, mastery *and* chaos, authorial presence *and* absence.<sup>45</sup> Colvin argues that 'this instability obliges us to re-examine Yourcenar's work in the light of the rules governing the reception and canonization of modern writers, and to study the way in which modern societies "manage" their cultural productions'.<sup>46</sup>

In line with this imperative, the present thesis proposes to highlight some of the specifically modern characteristics of Yourcenar's thought and literature. While, in the examples given, Colvin, Rasson and Golieth are principally concerned with literary and artistic modernism, I shall be focusing on political, cultural and philosophical modernity in Yourcenar. Taking into account the current paradoxical situation in Yourcenarian criticism, whereby the modernity of a 20<sup>th</sup>-Century writer needs to be argued and confirmed, I shall pursue an immanent approach for the best part of my thesis. This means that, rather than identifying the ways in which Yourcenar's work satisfies definitions of modernity that are external to it (as Golieth does), I shall try to follow its internal dynamic and logic, or lack thereof. Certainly, the critical terms which I shall be employing – authenticity, subjectivity, representation, fragmentation, alterity, and so on – carry an independent semantic charge, a fact which complicates the task of immanent criticism. However, I shall be adjusting these terms to Yourcenar's thought and discourse, so that, for instance, authenticity will be confounded with its opposite (Chapter 2) and fragmentation will imply the possibility of totality (Chapter 3). Moreover, I shall single out and prioritize other terms which are peculiar to Yourcenar's vocabulary and thought - for

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<sup>43</sup> Colvin, p. 17.

<sup>44</sup> Colvin, p. 30 and p. 18, respectively, emphasis by the author.

<sup>45</sup> Colvin, p. 13.

<sup>46</sup> Colvin, p. 30.

example, hiatus, disorder, revolt, freedom, acceptance, guardianship, life and eternity. Finally, my intention is to probe, rather than repress, the unexpected twists and contradictions of Yourcenar's writings. By drawing principally from the resources of the Yourcenarian text, I hope to highlight the ways in which it articulates, and responds to, the call of modernity.

Nevertheless, external critique will also be necessary – and I will come to this in the last chapter of my thesis – when the contradictions and ambiguities of *Mémoires d'Hadrien* will prove impossible to interrogate in their own terms. The issue in that final chapter will be the possibility of imagining a subject which is free from ontological determinations and which resists reduction to a stable identity with a solid home – Greece, Germany or Europe – and a projected future. Since my argument will be that Yourcenar's text shrinks from imagining this subject – a subject for which she nonetheless persistently searched –, I will take recourse to the poststructuralist critique of subjectivity and aesthetics and to what might be called a post-ontological thinking of alterity. The limits of the way authentic subjectivity is thought in Yourcenar will thus prove to overlap with the limits of philosophical and political modernity which she embraced as a writer.

Consequently, the present thesis can be broadly divided into two parts which supplement each other. Chapters 1 to 4 will underscore the intricate and uncompromising character of the concept of authenticity in Yourcenar's existential and political thought. Chapter 5, on the other hand, will focus on the critique of authenticity in general and on the limits that the quest for authenticity imposes on Yourcenar's perception of the subject.

More specifically, in Chapters 1 and 2, I shall look in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, in Yourcenar's monographs on Thomas Mann and Constantin Cavafy and, to a lesser extent, in *L'Œuvre au noir* and *Un homme obscur*, to see how the quest for authenticity relates to the impasse of representation. I shall underline the implications of this impasse with regard to the notion of selfhood, the quest for freedom, and the

scope of realism. Finally, I shall bring together her essay 'Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur' (1954) with Paul de Man's 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' (1969), to establish Yourcenar's answer to the problem of authenticity and, more generally, to that of semiotic referentiality.

In Chapter 3, I shall open up the discussion to consider the wider cultural and aesthetic parameters of the quest for authenticity in modernity. Yourcenar will emerge as an uncommonly astute, if conservative by disposition, critic of modernity, through a reading of her essay 'Diagnostic de l'Europe' in dialogue with Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936). Further, based on Benjamin's insights on translation and the notion of totality, I shall argue that Yourcenar ensures the narrative authenticity of her works and fictional characters by treating them as literary fragments existing finitely in time.

Spatiality, temporality and subjectivity in Yourcenar and in Heidegger will constitute the main themes of Chapter 4. I shall initiate a dialogue between *Being and Time* (1927) as well as other works by Heidegger, on the one hand, and various parts of Yourcenar's corpus, from *Pindare* (1931) to *Un homme obscur* (1982) on the other. In the process, I hope to show that Yourcenar develops an unsystematic but pervasive existential-ontological perception of the subject which, like Dasein, exists in a state of constant tension between its own past and future and remains in a state of difference from the world it inhabits finitely. This is the definition of existential authenticity. However, at the end of this chapter, the aporias of Yourcenar's and Heidegger's existentialism will start becoming evident, when the issue of history is raised. This chapter will ask a series of questions which can be summarized as follows: How can the authentic hero of Yourcenar's fiction, in his solitary union with his private world, understand and account for the infinite variety, concreteness and depth of collective history?

The modern subject's confrontation with history will be discussed in the last chapter of my thesis. Reading Lacoue-Labarthe's *La Fiction du politique* (1987) and

Lyotard's *Heidegger et les « juifs »* (with a lower case 'j', 1988), I shall argue that politics in modernity has generally been perceived in terms of the self constitution of peoples and nations as works of art. Inspired by a Greek model of aesthetics, this political aestheticism culminated historically in national aestheticism in the form of Nazism. I shall claim that, especially in *Mémoires*, Yourcenar embraces an analogous Greek-inspired perception of politics, and suggests that it is still appropriate for the purpose of Europe's political reconstruction in the aftermath of the Second World War. Despite the unambiguous rejection of barbarism in *Mémoires*, violence and exclusion as a result of the aestheticist perception of politics are dominant in this novel. I shall be tracing and examining instances of 'otherness' which do not conform to Hadrien's Hellenocentric model. More particularly, I shall be focusing on the cases of Antinoüs and the Jews, who suffer directly or indirectly from Hadrien's actions and remain voiceless or badly understood.

Yourcenar's work will thus be shown to participate knowingly in various aspects of the debate on modernity. Her work incorporates, processes and reflects modernity's concerns and contradictions, and attempts to provide literary, aesthetic and political solutions to them. In my opinion, it 'fails' precisely to the extent that modernity itself 'failed' to confront one of the issues that it so persistently thematized, namely, the issue of difference in representation. But this 'failure' can easily and legitimately be rephrased in terms of 'success'. The work of Yourcenar illustrates exceptionally well the paradoxical state of writing in modernity: it points to the impasse of representation, but attempts to bypass it; it articulates the political and historical intertext to which it belongs, but hopes to transcend it; it makes us aware of the futility of the search for authenticity, but still strives to achieve it.

# CHAPTER ONE

## SUBJECTIVITY, POLITICS AND THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION

In *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, Yourcenar establishes a relationship between subjectivity and politics on the basis of the problematics of representation. Although the rest of her fiction often revolves around similar issues, it is in the figure of Hadrien that the personal and the political are entwined and explored more consistently. The main narrative device of the novel, the memoirs of emperor Hadrian, serves precisely that purpose, as does the idea that these memoirs are addressed as a letter to Hadrien's future successor, Marc (Marcus Aurelius). As 'memoirs', the novel raises issues of selfhood, subjectivity and identity; as a long autobiographical 'letter' to the future emperor, it presents Hadrien's political thought and describes his political vision and activity. Both subjectivity and politics are considered by Yourcenar as forms of representation of the self and the community which the novel sets out to articulate; and both are submitted to a constant critique as categories of conceptual abstraction. This critique is distinctly modern in character and can be thematically connected with the existential thought of the first half of the twentieth century, on the one hand, and with poststructuralist theories of representation, on the other. In this chapter, I shall attempt to identify the particular terms of Yourcenar's critique of conceptuality as it emerges in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, but also in her essays and other works of fiction. I shall first focus on questions of existence and subjectivity and then on Yourcenar's

perception of politics and freedom. This discussion will give rise to a parallel investigation of Yourcenar's narrative realism which, more than a stylistic preference, constitutes a choice based on her implicit theories on subjectivity and representation.

## The impossibility of the subject

The first chapter of *Mémoires*, 'Animula vagula blandula', introduces the chief question of the novel, that of the subject and its relationship with the world. In a series of philosophical meditations, Hadrien explores the subject's inability to define itself in relation to a reality which it tends to conceptualize. The issue here is to understand 'human existence' and Hadrien notes that there are three ways of doing so, 'l'étude du soi', 'l'observation des autres' and 'les livres'.<sup>1</sup> None of these ways is found to be sufficiently effective, as none offers unmediated insight into the truth of being. I shall discuss briefly this part of the novel as it forms its theoretical backbone and defines the conditions of the quest for authentic subjectivity.

The overdetermination of reality through conceptual and artistic manipulation is succinctly confirmed in Hadrien's commentary on 'les livres': 'La lettre écrite m'a enseigné à écouter la voix humaine, tout comme les grandes attitudes immobiles des statues m'ont appris à apprécier les gestes. Par contre, et dans la suite, la vie m'a éclairci les livres.'<sup>2</sup> In retrospect, this assertion seems to anticipate the poststructuralist claim that experience is always already mediated by language and that the simplicity and 'naturalness' of life are in fact constructs of the mind. However, as the second part of the above passage also implies ('la vie m'a éclairci

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<sup>1</sup> OR, p. 302. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (Paris: Plon, 1951), for the first edition.

<sup>2</sup> OR, p. 302.



les livres'), the possibility of immediacy is not excluded by Yourcenar. On the contrary, it constitutes the existential goal of her main narrative characters who struggle to penetrate different layers of interpretation towards the indecipherable core of 'life'. As we shall see later, these layers of interpretation, as they accumulate over time, constitute nothing less than history. Already at the time of Hadrien, such interpretations, necessary as they are, are perceived as obstacles to man's quest for immediate contact with himself and with nature:

Les poètes nous transportent dans un monde plus vaste ou plus beau, plus ardent ou plus doux que celui qui nous est donné, différent par là même, et en pratique presque inhabitable. Les philosophes font subir à la réalité, pour pouvoir l'étudier pure, à peu près les mêmes transformations que le feu ou le pilon font subir au corps : rien d'un être ou d'un fait, tels que nous les avons connus, ne paraît subsister dans ces cristaux ou dans cette cendre. Les historiens nous proposent du passé des systèmes trop complets, des séries de causes et d'effets trop exacts et trop clairs pour avoir jamais été entièrement vrais ; ils réarrangent cette docile matière morte, et je sais que même à Plutarque échappera toujours Alexandre.<sup>3</sup>

Yourcenar discerns three techniques of appropriation, namely, idealisation (poetry), purification (philosophy) and oversystematization (historiography). Strictly speaking, there is nothing particularly original in this critique; but it leaves Hadrien, as much as Yourcenar's reader, at a loss before the necessity and the impossibility of representation. There is undoubtedly an element of oversimplification in Yourcenar's cursory assessment of these three disciplines, especially if we think that she refers to the perceived intellectual decline of her time as much as of that of Hadrien. In an interview with Patrick de Rosbo, Yourcenar would make the following statement:

Toutes les idéologies durcissent le passé, l'épurent, le systématisent à faux. Cela est vrai des nôtres : on peut aligner les faits historiques sur une idéologie marxiste, structuraliste, ou toute autre ; on peut réorganiser toute l'histoire dans le sens des progrès du capitalisme ou de la technologie. [...] Mais ce durcissement, ce dessèchement du vécu au profit d'idéologies régnautes n'est pas particulier à notre époque. *L'Histoire universelle* de Bossuet représente une même tentative pour faire entrer bon gré mal gré le vécu dans le cadre du dogmatisme chrétien du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> OR, pp. 302-3.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick de Rosbo, *Entretiens radiophoniques avec Marguerite Yourcenar* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1972), p. 56.

To the techniques of appropriation mentioned above, Yourcenar adds another one, namely ideological reduction. This quotation echoes the previous one in terms of the rejection of systematic thought as a means of capturing life in its mobility and malleability. While one admires Yourcenar for being instinctively sceptical vis-à-vis ideology and dogma, one is also surprised to find addressed pell-mell under these rubrics such different methods of analysis and approaches to existence as Marxism, structuralism, capitalism, technocracy and Christianity. Clearly, Yourcenar is not immune to her own critique of the different techniques of reduction and appropriation. At this point, however, I should place emphasis on what she understands as the incompatibility between the self and ‘le monde tel qu’il nous est donné’, ‘la réalité’, ‘l’être’, ‘le corps’, ‘le passé’, ‘le vécu’. These terms refer to a fleeting and chaotic reality with which the subject must establish a stable relationship in order to understand itself.

While the world is given to us as fact, our inauthentic relationship with it extends to our dealings with other people. With reference to ‘l’observation des hommes’, the second way of understanding existence mentioned in ‘*Animula vagula blandula*’, Hadrien points out that ‘presque tout ce que nous savons d’autrui est de seconde main’.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the lack of immediacy, the inadequacy of available methods of interpretation means that our relationship with others is inconclusive. Hadrien notes that he used to read police reports on his subjects in an effort to understand their acts, and then adds: ‘Mais ces rapports si naïvement circonstanciés s’ajoutent à la pile de mes dossiers sans m’aider le moins du monde à rendre le verdict final.’<sup>6</sup> The inability to make judgements reflects the absence of any valid frame of reference which would authenticate the relationship between human beings.

This comment may also be read as a defence of Yourcenar’s choice to approach her narrative subject using intuition as much as scholarship. This is confirmed in the

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<sup>5</sup> *OR*, p. 303.

<sup>6</sup> *OR*, p. 303.

‘Carnets de notes de *Mémoires d’Hadrien*’, Yourcenar’s 1952 appendix to this novel, where she notes that, in search of the figure of Hadrien, she had ‘un pied dans l’érudition, l’autre dans la magie’.<sup>7</sup> In ‘Ton et langage dans le roman historique’, an essay to which I shall return, Yourcenar explains her way of transcending the barriers of interpretation that separated her from her chief narrative characters, and more specifically from their ‘voice’.<sup>8</sup> Every step of her critique of representation in ‘Animula vagula blandula’ can be related to her perception of subjectivity and implicit narrative theory.

This also applies to the third way of evaluating human existence, ‘l’étude de soi’. Yourcenar shows how the non-representability of the world affects the subject by bringing about a schism at its core, pre-empting its autonomy, and forcing it to internalize alienation.

Quant à l’observation de moi-même, je m’y oblige, ne fût-ce que pour entrer en composition avec cet individu auprès de qui je serai jusqu’au bout forcé de vivre, mais une familiarité de près de soixante ans comporte encore bien des chances d’erreur. Au plus profond, ma connaissance de moi-même est obscure, intérieure, informulée, secrète comme une complicité. Au plus impersonnel, elle est aussi glacée que les théories que je puis élaborer sur les nombres : j’emploie ce que j’ai d’intelligence à voir de loin et de plus haut ma vie qui devient alors la vie d’un autre. Mais ces deux procédés de connaissance sont difficiles, et demandent, l’un, une descente en soi, l’autre, une sortie hors de soi-même.<sup>9</sup>

The subject’s aporetic relationship with reality is reflected in the way it attempts to understand itself. The aspect of the self which is recognizably as chaotic and mobile as nature escapes the intellect’s capacity for figuration and leaves it frustrated. Consequently, at stake here is nothing less than the unity and self-sufficiency of the subject. This will be the constitutive question of the novel, both for Hadrien, as the suffering hero, and for Yourcenar, as the writer who tries to portray him. She is aware that this attempt at self-identification, which she calls in the above passage *composition*, and which is in essence the projected reconciliation between the self

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<sup>7</sup> *OR*, p. 526. In Chapter 3, I shall discuss further this comment by Yourcenar.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Ton et langage dans le roman historique’, *EM*, pp. 289-311.

<sup>9</sup> *OR*, p. 304.

and the world, has the opposite from the desired effect. Rather than eliminating the distance between the subject and itself, it establishes this distance. On the one hand, as Hadrien points out, the theoretical attitude displaces the subject further from itself. Theory as the possibility of vision entails the element of objectification, which restores the opposition in terms of the gap between the observer and the thing observed. On the other hand, if unsystematic, non-speculative approaches are employed, then, according to the above passage, we come face to face with obscurity, interiority and formlessness. Both the rational and the mystical methods fail to efface the subject's difference from itself. They are, as Hadrien notes, 'outils plus ou moins émoussés : mais je n'en ai pas d'autres.'<sup>10</sup>

Trapped between the necessity of form and the inadequacy of the techniques of representation, Hadrien is overwhelmed with fear: 'Quand je considère ma vie, je suis épouvanté de la trouver informe'.<sup>11</sup> It is not the obscurity as such of the self that Hadrien fears (on the contrary, he feels 'complicit' in it), but the disorder and diversity of existence which render it unsuitable for aesthetic manipulation. Hadrien describes how his effort to delineate his own profile and thus delimit his identity perpetuates the difference from his true self, as it were, and ends in a blurred reflection of it: 'Je perçois bien dans cette diversité, dans ce désordre, la présence d'une personne, mais sa forme semble presque toujours tracée par la pression des circonstances ; ses traits se brouillent comme une image reflétée sur l'eau.'<sup>12</sup> The theme of the gap between form and chaos, order and disorder, is here re-iterated in terms of the opposition between stable presence and contingency.

At the same time, this passage can also be read as a reference to Yourcenar's effort to stabilize the elusive image of Hadrien. She perceives well his 'presence', but his various dissonant traits and acts, as they have survived in historical and artistic

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<sup>10</sup> *OR*, p. 304.

<sup>11</sup> *OR*, p. 304.

<sup>12</sup> *OR*, p. 305.

sources, do not form a continuum. Thus, the difference within the subject is reproduced at the level of the relationship between author and narrative character. This is especially true in the case of the historical novel, understood as a literary form that attempts to lend meaning and represent the segmented and intrinsically unrepresentable material of the past. In the 'Carnets de notes', Yourcenar writes:

Tout nous échappe, et tous, et nous-mêmes. La vie de mon père m'est plus inconnue que celle d'Hadrien. Ma propre existence, si j'avais à l'écrire, serait reconstituée par moi du dehors, péniblement, comme celle d'un autre ; j'aurais à m'adresser à des lettres, aux souvenirs d'autrui, pour fixer ces flottantes mémoires. Ce ne sont jamais que murs écroulés, pans d'ombre. S'arranger pour que les lacunes de nos textes, en ce qui concerne la vie d'Hadrien, coïncident avec ce qu'eussent été ses propres oublis.<sup>13</sup>

Yourcenar perceives simultaneously within herself, within Hadrien, and between herself and her narrative character the indefinable difference that costs the subject its history and identity. In this context, the last sentence of the above passage should not only refer to the way Yourcenar left a margin for pragmatic omissions in *Mémoires*, but also to a subtler arrangement. Along with these omissions of what she did not know about Hadrien, Yourcenar implies that she arranged for the non-representation of what Hadrien did not know, or no longer knew, about himself. Non-representation means here the refusal to aestheticize and speculate on what she calls 'murs écroulés, pans d'ombres'. Rather than interpreting or illuminating – literarily, critically, philosophically - these obscure areas and ruins, which form a separate thematics in her fiction and criticism, Yourcenar leaves them untouched. This essentially negative narrative attitude is a result of her acceptance that these areas of the self can never be represented, yet representation is the only available means for approaching them. Yourcenar uses conventional methods of narration, such as realism, in order to demonstrate not the 'unrepresentable' itself, but its outer limits. As she remarks again in the 'Carnets de notes des *Mémoires d'Hadrien*', 'ces notes ne cernent qu'une lacune'.<sup>14</sup> More than the contour of Hadrien's 'face', the novel sets out to trace the

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<sup>13</sup> OR, p. 527-28.

<sup>14</sup> OR, p. 523.

outer limits of what is described in ‘Animula vagula blandula’ as an ‘hiatus indéfinissable’ within the self.<sup>15</sup> I shall now argue that the recording of the distance between the thinking self and its internalized lacunae is one of the key significations of Yourcenar’s realism.

### The perspective of realism

As a technique of representation, Yourcenar’s realism operates in a negative mode. Its purpose is to emphasize the insufficiency of the subject as well as the insufficiency of the act of representation. In so far as the intention of the narrative is to demonstrate a lack, an originary schism that gives birth to a ‘subject’, realism fulfils this intention through its very inappropriateness to deal with that lack. One of realism’s purposes in *Mémoires* is to describe the exterior aspect of things, to provide an inventory of the life and the thoughts of Hadrien, without reducing the gap within the self into a theory or an aesthetics. So much is suggested at the beginning of the book, where, in a direct address to Marc, his future successor, Hadrien remarks: ‘Je t’offre ici comme correctif un récit dépourvu d’idées préconçues et de principes abstraits, tiré de l’expérience d’un seul homme qui est moi-même.’<sup>16</sup>

Yourcenar compared realism to an inventory of the sensible in a footnote to her interviews with Patrick de Rosbo which refers to Sainte-Beuve’s suggestion that the description of the exterior aspect of things ‘goes without saying’ (‘va de soi’).

[Les] maîtres du roman réaliste [...] ne trouvaient pas nécessairement que l’aspect extérieur de la vie ‘allait de soi’. La description du repas de noces d’Emma Bovary et des véhicules qui y ont amené les convives n’est ni moins minutieuse ni moins exhaustive que celle des appartements de Salammbô ; elle est seulement, il faut bien

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<sup>15</sup> OR, p. 305.

<sup>16</sup> OR, p. 302.

le dire, plus authentique. L'énumération et la peinture des objets dont s'encombre une civilisation peut devenir un inventaire, ou une satire de celle-ci.<sup>17</sup>

The reason why Flaubert's realism in *Madame Bovary* is more authentic than that in *Salammbô* is evidently that in the first case he had actually witnessed a similar event or spectacle to the one he described. But if realism in general is more authentic than other forms of fictional representation, it is because it only aspires to inventory the representable aspects of reality. Paradoxically, its immediate referent is not the entire realm of the real, which is too fleeting a notion to lend itself to representation, but only the sensible and the intelligible. In her interviews with Matthieu Galey, Yourcenar explains:

Je sais que je tombe dans l'inexplicable, quand j'affirme que la réalité – cette notion si flottante –, la connaissance la plus exacte possible des êtres est notre point de contact, et notre voie d'accès aux choses qui dépassent la réalité. Le jour où nous sortons de certaines réalités très simples, nous fabulons, nous tombons dans la rhétorique ou dans l'intellectualisme mort.<sup>18</sup>

As Yourcenar distinguishes between 'simple reality' and things that lie beyond it, so she imagines a meticulous and exhaustive realism which brings the narrative to the outer limits of what exceeds the phenomenal. The dark area that remains untouched by realist depiction constitutes the negative focus of reference. That we should only have access to the hidden truth of our being through the literary or artistic manipulation of its phenomenal aspects is a situation which Yourcenar calls 'presque un scandale pour l'esprit'.<sup>19</sup> She explains it further in her monograph on Thomas Mann, when she attempts to interpret his 'meticulous' and 'obsessive' realism:

Le méticuleux réalisme de Mann, ce réalisme obsédé qui caractérise si souvent la vision allemande, sert d'eau mère aux structures cristallines de l'allégorie ; il sert aussi de lit à la coulée quasi souterraine du mythe et du songe. *La Mort à Venise*, qui s'ouvre par le récit réaliste d'une promenade dans la banlieue de Munich, ne nous épargne rien des horaires de trains et de paquebots, des bavardages d'un barbier et des tons voyants d'une cravate, organise les déboires et les contretemps d'un voyage en une allégorique danse des morts ; tout en dessous coule, inépuisable et brûlante,

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<sup>17</sup> Rosbo, pp. 48-49.

<sup>18</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar, *Les Yeux ouverts: Entretiens avec Matthieu Galey* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1980), p. 60.

<sup>19</sup> *Les Yeux ouverts*, p. 59.

secrètement issue d'un symbolisme plus antique, la grande rêverie d'un homme en proie à sa propre fin, tirant de son fonds la mort et l'amour.<sup>20</sup>

This passage says as much about the way Yourcenar understands realism in her own writings as it does about Mann's narrative technique. Realism remains this side of the prosaic, and indeed records obsessively and meticulously the phenomenal aspect of reality, but its true referent lies beyond its own supposedly self-contained structure. As Yourcenar suggests, realism needs to be supplemented by such erratic and differential narrative techniques as allegory and myth, so as to approach its final referent, which is again confirmed in this essay as 'le gouffre intérieur'. 'Réalité, allégorie et mythe se fondent les uns dans les autres.'<sup>21</sup>

In the following chapter, I will return to the notion of allegory and the way it authenticates the narrative. In the present context, I would argue that Yourcenar interprets realism in a manner which acknowledges and builds upon its failures as a technique of representation, for example, in conventional historical narrative. Historiographic realism, as Barthes has shown, is tautological; it signifies nothing but itself: 'c'est la catégorie du "réel" (et non ses contenus contingents) qui est alors signifiée ; autrement dit, la carence même du signifié au profit du seul référant devient le signifiant même du réalisme.'<sup>22</sup> Barthes claims convincingly that realist narrative purports to ignore the linguistic constitution of man's relationship with the world by confusing the signified with the semiotic referent. Realism's narrative and normative agency depends on creating the illusion that the representational sign refers to reality, where in fact it refers only to itself. This is a situation which Yourcenar accepts, while attempting to turn it to the profit of the truth of the narrative.

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<sup>20</sup> EM, p. 166-67. From 'Humanisme et hermétisme chez Thomas Mann', in *Sous bénéfice d'inventaire*.

<sup>21</sup> EM, p. 167.

<sup>22</sup> Roland Barthes, 'L'effet de réel', in R. Barthes *et al.*, *Littérature et réalité* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), pp. 81-90, (p. 89).



The difference between realist representation and that to which it 'refers' is the very difference that Yourcenar discerns within the subject. The impossibility of self-contained subjectivity is reflected by the ineffectiveness of the narrative. If realism always fails to refer to the reality it targets, then it should be the privileged method to employ in search of a reality which is always fleeting and deferred. Thus, paradoxically, the final referent of Yourcenar's (and Thomas Mann's) realism is not a 'believable' fictional space-time, nor is it the 'category of the real', as Barthes writes. It is the reality that realism fails to represent. In contrast to modernist methods of fictional representation which frequently disrupt the narrative thus tending to schematize what does not lend itself to figuration and interpretation, realism closes in on a gap without attempting to verbalize it. When it does verbalize it, the result is poor, 'grotesque', thus proving further the insufficiency of the act of representation. In her essay on Thomas Mann, Yourcenar wonders whether Naphta and Settembrini, the two philosophers of *The Magic Mountain*, 'sont d'énormes porte-voix par lesquels s'énonce grotesquement, puisqu'il passe par les mots, un problème trop vaste pour qui les mots ne sont pas faits'.<sup>23</sup> Whether it stays within the limits of the phenomenology of the real or it becomes self-consciously grotesque, Yourcenar's realism has little to do with positivism or the belief that entities exist independently of language or consciousness. On the contrary, Yourcenar's realism seeks to demonstrate the limits of representation and thus to map negatively the 'indefinable hiatus' inside the self and between the self and the world.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *EM*, p. 167.

<sup>24</sup> May Chehab argues that Yourcenar used a similar strategy of closing in on the absent subject ('l'absence du moi') in her autobiography *Le Labyrinthe du monde* (in *EM*), in which Yourcenar herself is hardly present. Chehab asks:

'Alors, en quoi consiste exactement le « moi » de Yourcenar ?

Sa caractéristique majeur est qu'il est construit du dehors. En effet, lorsque les contours de la personne ne peuvent plus être définis à partir de son activité ou de son affectivité propres [...], il ne reste que l'observation *indirecte* spatiale ou temporelle, qui a dicté au XXe siècle un grand nombre de quêtes ontologiques détournées. C'est pourquoi André Breton cherche son visage dans ceux qu'il hante, et Saint-John Perse adopte la déambulation circulaire de la *Strophê* plotinienne dans *Amers* comme voie d'approche d'un Être insaisissable. C'est pourquoi Yourcenar, elle, choisit la quête généalogique.'

In my analysis, I will pursue further the question of realism in fiction, and whether, in spite of the structuralist critique, it actively explores the limits of narrative and points to what lies beyond its competence. My intention and method will be to identify and follow in good faith Yourcenar's claims with respect to artistic and narrative representation and to test these claims not against a specific theory, but against the Yourcenarian text itself. I shall discuss the theoretical consistency of these claims, for instance with regard to the question of referentiality, and shall confirm their relevance to their immediate cultural and historical context, that of modernity. Ultimately, the strength of Yourcenar's interpretation of realism will be proportional to the validity of her theory of representation, a theory which itself originates in the problematics of existence, subjectivity and politics. Understanding Yourcenar's realism is therefore part of the process of examining her perception of the subject, its existential and political identity (or lack thereof) and the nature of the unrepresentable hiatus that Yourcenar discerns within this subject.

From this introductory discussion of Yourcenar's realism and from the analysis of 'Animula vagula blandula', two themes emerge with clarity. The first concerns the link that Yourcenar establishes between existential identity and the act of representation. The failure of the subject fully to schematize its relationship with the world leads to a permanent state of internalized difference. The existential is transferred from the start to the level of the aesthetic. It is the formlessness and disorder of reality which begets self-alienation. The second theme has to do with Yourcenar's conviction that authentic subjectivity is still possible, despite the debilitating pressure of the aesthetic on the existential. We know this because, after all, Hadrien goes on to write his memoirs. The book will be a realist representation of Hadrien's life through which we expect him to emerge as the authentic subject.

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May Chehab, 'La Déduction du « moi » et l'impossible autobiologie', in Rémy Poignault *et al.* (eds), *L'Écriture du moi dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar* (Clermont-Ferrand: SIEY, 2004), pp. 75-88, (p. 76, emphasis by the author).

Authentic, because through the narrative Hadrien will restore a meaningful continuity between himself and the world, without attempting to effect a transcendental, mystical or ideological reconciliation of the two. The promise of the novel is that authenticity is still possible within the impasse of referentiality and within the context of nihilism. This is also the promise of other works by Yourcenar, including *L'Œuvre au noir* and *Un homme obscur*, as I will point out on various occasions. Having these two themes in mind, I shall now shift the focus of the investigation to Yourcenar's perception of politics and freedom.

### Freedom as a form of accepting

Even though the subject understands itself inadequately by means of the conceptual manipulation of reality, freedom, in Yourcenar, can never be freedom from representation. As I mentioned above, she frequently thinks of history as a series of interpretations of reality, superimposed on each other and never quite reaching their mark. In her novella of 1982 *Un homme obscur*, she returned to this question. One of the emblematic figures of the book, the philosopher Léo Belmonte, explains to Nathanaël, the main character, who has come to visit him on his death bed, that the ongoing difference between ideas and things reveals our incessant desire for order:

Oui, il en est des choses et des idées comme d'un corps qui se décharne [...] mais leurs rapports demeurent néanmoins inchangés. D'autres chairs et d'autres notions prennent la place de celles qui pourrissent... Ces myriades de lignes, ces milliers, ces millions de courbes par lesquelles, depuis qu'il y a des hommes, l'esprit a passé, pour donner au chaos au moins l'apparence d'un ordre...<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> OR, p. 1009. *Un homme obscur* was first published as part of a trilogy, *Comme l'eau qui coule*, which included two novellas, *Anna Soror...* and *Un homme obscur*, and a short story, *Une belle matinée*. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Comme l'eau qui coule* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982).

Belmonte perceives history as a sequence of more and more sophisticated attempts to re-write chaos in terms of order. Sick and cynical, he himself is the embodiment and the result of man's constitutive imprisonment within ideational structures. His entire work has been an effort to define freedom and identity in terms of order and beauty. At the end of his life, he realizes that this philosophical attitude (by which Yourcenar, more often than not, understands a purist attitude) leads nowhere: 'Les passerelles des théorèmes et les ponts-levis des syllogismes ne mènent nulle part, et ce qu'ils rejoignent est peut-être Rien. Mais c'est beau.'<sup>26</sup> Beauty of the mind contrasts sharply in these pages of *Un homme obscur* with Belmonte's decomposing body, but it is in the latter that he will seek a definition of God.

[...] trouver un trou par lequel descendre vers je ne sais quels antipodes divins... Encore faudrait-il que [...] ce trou fût au centre, fût un centre... Mais du moment que le monde ( *aut Deus* ) est une sphère dont le centre est partout [...], il suffirait de creuser n'importe où pour amener Dieu, comme au bord de la mer on amène l'eau quand on creuse le sable... Creuser des doigts, des dents et du groin, dans cette profondeur qui est Dieu... ( *Aut Nihil, aut forte Ego.* ) Car le secret, c'est que je creuse en moi, puisqu'en ce moment je suis au centre.<sup>27</sup>

Belmonte has to accept that there is no universal order of things, only a pattern in the way disorder manifests itself as the difference between things and ideas. Through a complex reasoning, he locates within the self the divine element, the 'nothingness' which escapes representation. He concludes that there is no unique truth in the centre of the universe; rather, the diffusion of truth is revealed every time that the desire for identity is frustrated. Everyone and everything is a centre to their world, and in every case the primordial difference between representation and what lies beyond it is attested.

While Belmonte never frees himself from the longing for beauty and identity, he points to a direction that other characters in Yourcenar's work have followed in their pursuit of freedom. This direction involves accepting the failure of representation and

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<sup>26</sup> *OR*, p. 1011.

<sup>27</sup> *OR*, p. 1011-12.

integrating this failure in a new definition of authenticity. Even at this moment of intellectual honesty, Belmonte remains above all a philosopher, and his account can at best be grotesque, as I have already suggested. On the contrary, Hadrien is above all a statesman and must translate this theory into a pragmatic political project.

In *Les Yeux ouverts*, Yourcenar stresses Hadrien's pragmatism: 'Dans le cas d'Hadrien, je pense que le pragmatisme l'a emporté'<sup>28</sup>. In her interviews with Rosbo, she also discusses Hadrien's pragmatism in conjunction with the political and existential imperative to act. She explains that Hadrien's *sagesse* consists in his ability to move beyond the chaos of existence towards a constructive relation with the material world. 'Cette sagesse humaniste est aussi éminemment pragmatique, une façon d'accepter les faits et de partir d'eux pour construire.'<sup>29</sup> Like Belmonte's philosophy, Hadrien's pragmatism involves accepting the disorder of the world and the concomitant deficiency of the subject. Pragmatism's particular meaning, however, lies in Hadrien's resolution to find a practical way to salvage humanism and the possibility of existential and political freedom.

Thus, an opposition develops in *Mémoires* between Hadrien's pragmatism and accepting attitude, on the one hand, and the predominant philosophy of his time, late Stoicism, on the other. Epictetus was the most famous proponent of Stoicism at that time, and he advocated the renouncement of bodily feelings and earthly attachments. Hadrien stresses that this old philosopher, who lived a pure life in voluntary poverty, had seemed to him 'en possession d'une liberté quasi divine'. He then specifies that this divine freedom is not the kind of freedom that he himself is after.

Mais Épictète renonçait à trop de choses, et je m'étais vite rendu compte que rien, pour moi, n'était plus dangereusement facile que de renoncer. [...] Ces sages s'efforçaient de retrouver leur dieu par-delà l'océan des formes, de le réduire à cette qualité d'unique, d'intangible, d'incorporel, à laquelle il a renoncé le jour où il s'est voulu univers.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Les Yeux ouverts*, p. 156.

<sup>29</sup> Rosbo, p. 100.

<sup>30</sup> *OR*, p. 398.

Philosophy is again put to the test for not taking into account the facticity of the world and for attempting to reduce contingent forms into ideas. The difficult freedom which comes from accepting is thus opposed to the philosophical freedom which comes from renouncing. This message is specifically targeted at Marcus Aurelius, the addressee of the novel, who was of course himself an important Stoic philosopher.

Pour moi, j'ai cherché la liberté plus que la puissance, et la puissance seulement parce que, en partie, elle favorisait la liberté. Ce qui m'intéressait n'était pas une philosophie de l'homme libre (tous ceux qui s'y essayent m'ennuyèrent) mais une technique ; je voulais trouver la charnière où notre volonté s'articule au destin, où la discipline seconde, au lieu de la freiner, la nature. Comprends bien qu'il ne s'agit pas ici de la dure volonté du stoïque, dont tu t'exagères le pouvoir, ni de je ne sais quel choix ou quel refus abstrait, qui insulte aux conditions de notre monde plein, continu, formé d'objets et de corps.<sup>31</sup>

If there are some anti-Sartrean undertones in this passage, especially in the phrase 'je ne sais quel choix ou quel refus abstrait', they can be attributed to Yourcenar's sceptical attitude towards existentialism as a philosophy which dominated the post-war cultural scene in France and which she found too abstract.<sup>32</sup> Indeed the interest of this passage lies in the key oppositions between *philosophie* and *technique*, and between *volonté* and *destin*. These two oppositions are intimately linked to each other and form the semantic axis along which Yourcenar's perception of freedom and her political and aesthetic thought as expressed in *Mémoires* are structured. The metaphor of *la charnière* transfers the problem of the existential discrepancy between desire – 'volonté' - and its frustration – 'destin' - onto a practical-technical level. With this metaphor Yourcenar intimates her conviction that the transition from thought to action, as far as both existence and politics are concerned, entails a shift in one's mode of thinking for which philosophy cannot prepare the subject. Inasmuch as

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<sup>31</sup> *OR*, p. 318.

<sup>32</sup> In a 1987 interview for RAI, the Italian state television channel, Yourcenar was asked by Francesca Sanvitale whether she were in contact with the French existentialists, for example Sartre, Camus, Blanchot. She answered: 'Pas énormément, parce que je trouve toute cette littérature beaucoup trop intellectualiste, beaucoup trop dialectique ; et dans un moment où il serait si important de voir de près et de s'intéresser à la réalité des choses, elle tourne le dos aux choses.' Maurice Delcroix (ed.), *Marguerite Yourcenar: Portrait d'une voix* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), p. 366.

philosophy constitutes a closed, self-referential systematization of reality, it resists translation into action. In the work of Yourcenar, the example of Léo Belmonte, the extreme philosopher who cannot provide a legitimate account for what remains incommunicable to thinking, illustrates the theme of the failures of conceptual thought even when it tries to radicalize itself. At the same time, Hadrien's quest for a 'technique' constitutes a call for a post-philosophical and at the same time more original understanding of the relationship between the self and the world. 'La charnière' is the emblematic metaphor for this new relationship, for it implies that this relationship must be articulated – in art, literature, politics, and so on - on a pragmatic, that is, non-conceptual basis.

Yourcenar also juxtaposes discipline with nature, which helps us understand the opposition between 'volonté' and 'destin' with reference to the problematics of representation. 'Volonté' expresses the desire for the production of meaning through the 'disciplined' effort to discover order in nature, or to impose order on it, depending on one's critical and political stance. Therefore, 'volonté' is the will for signification through art, language, as well as politics; it is the artistic intention which, as Yourcenar implies in the above passage, usually manifests itself in the effort to immobilize nature. On the other hand, 'destin' is a more puzzling term, but it should not be construed as connoting a teleological design of existence.<sup>33</sup> It rather signifies the natural necessity which frustrates desire, refuses artistic intention and confirms the distance between the work of man and the inaccessibility of nature. Claude Foucart has interpreted in analogous terms the notion of 'destinée d'homme', which is mentioned in 'Animula vagula blandula'.<sup>34</sup> Foucart points out that by 'destinée' we may understand the inevitable 'hiatus' within the subject, which

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<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere, Yourcenar explains that she does not favour the idea of predetermination and fate. During her interviews with Matthieu Galey, she remarks: 'Je dirais que la vie ne me semble pas avoir de dessin (de dessein) défini. (Ou, si elle en a un, c'est à des profondeurs que nous ne pouvons pas atteindre.) [...] Je ne crois pas à un destin irrévocablement prescrit.' *Les Yeux ouverts*, p. 315.

<sup>34</sup> *OR*, p. 304.

precludes the possibility of identity. ‘Cet “hiatus” trouve son reflet immédiat dans l’aspect “informe” de la vie. [...] Là est un élément capital dans ce jaugeage de la distance considérée comme image de la “destinée d’homme.”’<sup>35</sup> Thus ‘destin’ refers to the formlessness of life and to the suspension of every project of representation. In this context, ‘trouver la charnière’ announces Hadrien’s project to coordinate the will for immediacy that drives creativity and the destiny of difference that awaits the work of art as well as political action.

These ideas and their impact on Yourcenar’s existential and political thought will be discussed further in this and the following chapter. With regard to the question of freedom, it is clear that its existential and political dimensions largely coincide and are envisioned by Yourcenar from an aesthetic perspective. From my discussion so far it follows that the definition of freedom must involve awareness of man’s entanglement within representational structures and must also account for the necessary frustration of any claim to original creativity. So, exactly how does Yourcenar understand the concept of ‘technique de liberté’ and how does it authenticate man’s actions? In the pages that follow the passage quoted above (pp. 318-19), Hadrien gives a number of examples of the ways he implemented this technique with an aim to mould his personality. These examples function mostly as practical advice to his addressee, Marc, yet also lead gradually to the blurring of the boundary between freedom and its opposite: ‘J’ai rêvé d’un plus secret acquiescement ou d’une plus souple volonté’; and further on, ‘je m’efforçais d’atteindre par degré cet état de liberté, ou de soumission, presque pur’. Finally, Hadrien offers the paradoxical idea of ‘liberté d’acquiescement’: ‘Mais c’est encore à la liberté d’acquiescement, la plus ardue de toutes, que je me suis le plus rigoureusement appliqué. Je voulais l’état où j’étais’.<sup>36</sup> The perception of a form of

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<sup>35</sup> Claude Foucart, ‘Marguerite Yourcenar, L’Exil et la distance’, in Bérengère Deprez and Ana de Medeiros (eds), *Marguerite Yourcenar: Écritures de l’exil* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia Bruylant, 1998), pp. 267-276, (p. 269).

<sup>36</sup> All quotations from *OR*, pp. 318-319.



freedom which consists in acquiescing to the state in which one happens to be merits further elaboration, not only because of its apparent absurdity, but also because it constitutes one of the key ideas that infiltrate Yourcenar's critical thought.

There is no doubt that the 'liberté d'acquiescement' is at odds with mainstream Western perceptions of freedom. A comparison of 'la liberté d'acquiescement' with the forms of freedom examined by Isaiah Berlin in his seminal essay 'Two Concepts of Freedom' is telling. Berlin accepts that there are 'more than two hundred senses of [the] protean word' freedom, but examines 'no more than two of these senses – but those central ones, with a great deal of human history behind them'.<sup>37</sup> He first discusses 'negative freedom', that is, the liberal conception of freedom *from* constraint (physical, social, moral and so on).<sup>38</sup> Then, he makes a separate case for 'positive freedom', the radical freedom *to* rule oneself and realize one's potential. He takes his discussion far enough to suggest that these two concepts of freedom are based on two historically distinct ideals of authentic selfhood. A negative one, which is pursued through 'self-abnegation in order to attain independence'; and a positive one which aims at 'self-realization, or total self-identification with a specific principle or ideal in order to attain the selfsame end'.<sup>39</sup> It is not difficult to trace evidence, in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, of Yourcenar's scepticism with regard to the actual possibility of achieving either of these two types of liberty.

As far as negative freedom is concerned, Yourcenar's critique of abnegation as a method of self-liberation is at its strongest in the passages where Hadrien argues against the ascetics and the Stoics, of whom Berlin also makes frequent mention. Berlin associates the search for independence, that is, negative liberty, with 'a strategic retreat into an inner citadel – my reason, my soul, my "noumenal" self' and

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<sup>37</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 118-172, (p. 121).

<sup>38</sup> 'This is liberty as it has been conceived by liberals in the modern world from the days of Erasmus [...] to our own', Berlin, pp. 127-28.

<sup>39</sup> Berlin, p. 134.

adds that ‘this is the traditional self-emancipation of ascetics and quietists, of stoics or Buddhist sages’.<sup>40</sup> In *Mémoires*, criticism of asceticism takes the form of a Brahman whom Hadrien met on the bank of the Euphrates and whom he described in similar terms as the Stoics: ‘Ce brahmane était arrivé à l’état où rien, sauf son corps, ne le séparait plus du dieu intangible, sans substance et sans forme.’<sup>41</sup> Both Epictetus and the Brahman are judged by Hadrien as ‘ces purs fanatiques.’<sup>42</sup>

Yourcenar’s scepticism extends also to freedom of the positive kind, that is, the possibility of self-identification with specific principles. While existential identification between the self and the world remains Hadrien’s goal, he acknowledges that the principles which are supposed to provide the base for achieving it are transitory and reductive. The chapter ‘Animula vagula blandula’ can indeed be read as a treatise on the relativity of principles and ideals – philosophical, ethical, aesthetic. Hadrien is convinced that principles have only conceptual value and, therefore, do not reflect reality as it appears to the observer and as it is lived by the self. Principles *per se* are useless to the seeker of truth. As I will discuss in Chapter 2, for Yourcenar, the political leader ought to manipulate principles and ideals, rather than abide by them, as they only belong to ephemeral historical realities.

The difference between these historically recognizable types of freedom and Yourcenar’s ‘liberté d’acquiescement’ will be further underscored, if we consider the forms of relationship between man and the world that these types of freedom entail. Despite their differences, both the radical and the liberal approaches promote the idea of mastery over the self and the environment, whether in an aggressive, or in a defensive way. Berlin identifies positive liberty as a form of mastery: ‘The ‘positive’ sense of the word ‘liberty’ derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be

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<sup>40</sup> Berlin, p. 135.

<sup>41</sup> *OR*, p. 397.

<sup>42</sup> *OR*, p. 398.

his own master'.<sup>43</sup> But negative freedom is a form of mastery as well. With reference to Berlin's distinction, Leslie Paul Thiele makes the following statement:

Negative liberty signals the individual's control of his or her immediate environment, of his or her 'private' space and time. [...] Negative liberty [...] pertains to sovereign control of a personal realm. This is the realm of private property, which includes, following John Locke's formulation, the property of one's self. [...] Positive libertarians advocate a transcendent, socially defined self that achieves mastery over itself and its world by way of self-given law. Negative libertarians advocate an empirical, atomic self that achieves mastery over a private domain through the expression of will.<sup>44</sup>

The typically Western qualification of freedom as mastery contrasts with the form of freedom that Hadrien pursues. Yourcenar's commentary on Hadrien's imperial title of 'Maître de tout', bestowed on him by the Athenians, is characteristic in this respect. The reader is asked to understand this title not as a confirmation of Hadrien's authority but as a reward for his 'collaboration' with the people and, more metaphorically, with the spirit of his time. 'J'avais collaboré avec les âges, avec la vie grecque elle-même ; l'autorité que j'exerçais était moins un pouvoir qu'une mystérieuse puissance, supérieure à l'homme, mais qui n'agit efficacement qu'à travers l'intermédiaire d'une personne humaine.'<sup>45</sup> This is a richly ambiguous statement, to which I shall return in Chapter 5. But as far as the notion of mastery is concerned, it suggests that Hadrien has found the 'charnière' that coordinates 'volonté' and 'destin'. The implication here is that, if Hadrien is a 'maître', it is because, in his quality as the head of state, he has submitted the will for representation and creativity to a higher truth, which could be construed as man's true being, God, or nature. Paradoxically, in this context, *liberté* is a synonym of *soumission*, and *maîtrise* is a synonym of *collaboration*. These are two of a series of semantic inversions that Yourcenar effects in *Mémoires* and elsewhere, and which I propose to identify and interpret in the course of my thesis.

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<sup>43</sup> Berlin, p. 131.

<sup>44</sup> Leslie Paul Thiele, *Timely Meditations: Martin Heidegger and Postmodern Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 68-69.

<sup>45</sup> *OR*, p. 422.

During her interviews with Matthieu Galey, Yourcenar argued that man's freedom to master and mould his existence is, in reality, only a half-freedom: she referred to 'l'homme maître, ordonnateur et sculpteur de soi-même, libre de choisir entre le mal et le bien, entre la folie et la sagesse, don et liberté que l'animal n'a pas. Mais précisément cette quasi-liberté (car qui la dira complète ?) nous rend responsables'.<sup>46</sup> Freedom of choice, mastery of the world and the self - the common targets of both the liberal and radical approaches - are not authentic forms of liberty. A dedicated ecologist and animal lover, Yourcenar believes that animals are in a position to enjoy true freedom: 'Il y a cette immense liberté de l'animal, enfermé certes dans les limites de son espèce, mais vivant sans plus sa réalité d'*être*, sans tout le faux que nous ajoutons à la sensation d'exister'.<sup>47</sup> The freedom of animals is at the antipodes of human liberty as mastery and freedom of choice. Because for animals there is no defining divide between 'will' and 'destiny', they experience no difference with themselves. They offer humans the spectacle of unquestioning acceptance of time and space.

This primordial state of being is also hinted at by Yourcenar in her essay 'Qui sait si l'âme des bêtes va en bas'. In this essay, she challenges the common interpretation of the biblical injunction for man to be 'maître et seigneur [du] peuple des animaux'. Yourcenar refers to the Jewish-Christian myth of creation to suggest that Adam could have understood freedom differently:

Cet Adam, encore intouché par la chute, aurait aussi bien pu se sentir promu au rang de protecteur, d'arbitre, de modérateur de la création tout entière, utilisant les dons qui lui avaient été faits en surplus, ou différemment, de ceux octroyés aux animaux, pour parachever et maintenir le bel équilibre du monde, dont Dieu l'avait fait non le tyran, mais l'intendant.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Les Yeux ouverts*, p. 319.

<sup>47</sup> *Les Yeux ouverts*, p. 318, Yourcenar's emphasis.

<sup>48</sup> All quotations from *EM*, p. 374. 'Qui sait si l'âme des bêtes va en bas' (written in 1981) is included in the collection of essays *Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).

Here, the meaning of mastery and freedom is subverted and understood, paradoxically, in terms of mediation and administration. Yourcenar imagines a prelapsarian functional relationship between man and nature, which has been lost because of misuse of man's 'gifts' ('dons'). These gifts, which distinguish man from animals, are precisely that to which Yourcenar referred as 'volonté', the desire for representation or the possibility of art and politics in the broad sense, through which, when used appropriately, the world's 'beautiful balance' is manifested. This state of authenticity is contrasted with freedom as mastery and tyranny, which corresponds to conventional socio-political approaches to liberty in the West, and is based on a misconception of man's creative impulse and power. The ecological definition of freedom as a form of *acquiescement* presupposes the recognition that the 'gift' of art is a 'surplus', a supplement to nature, and it installs a permanent difference between man and nature which man has to accept. *Accepting* and *acquiescing* are therefore key words in Yourcenar's thinking on politics and existence because they imply that freedom and authentic selfhood should come as a result of an art (a language, a representation) which consciously preserves, rather than effaces the difference between man and the world.

To understand the concept of *liberté d'acquiescement*, it is important to raise the question as to what or whom one 'acquiesces'. There is undoubtedly an apparent paradox in Yourcenar's political position on freedom. If 'la liberté d'acquiescement' differs fundamentally from common revolutionary or libertarian conceptions of freedom, then it must eventually lead to the subject's renunciation of any claim to mastery over not only other people's 'destin', but also its own. Is there not a risk, then, to understand the formula 'Je voulais l'état où j'étais' as a gratuitous defence of the *status quo*? In her essay 'Présentation critique de Constantin Cavafy', Yourcenar explains herself: 'il importe toujours de savoir si, en dernière analyse, l'œuvre d'un

poète s'inscrit en faveur de la révolte ou de l'acceptation'.<sup>49</sup> In the context of her assessment of Cavafy's poetry, she puts forward an interpretation of 'acquiescement' as a condition that contains revolt: 'On peut dire sans paradoxe que la révolte ici se place à l'intérieur de l'acquiescement, fait inévitablement partie de la condition humaine que le poète reconnaît pour sienne.' What is more, she traces the presence of revolt in the origin of every act of true acceptance.

Les très beaux vers inspirés par un passage de Dante, *Che fece... il grand rifiuto*, poème du raidissement et du refus, demeurent néanmoins situés au plus profond de l'acceptation, formulent le cas extrême et personnel où il y aurait révolte à ne pas se révolter. C'est qu'une vue complètement acceptante ne peut guère se baser que sur le sentiment très fort de ce qu'il y a d'unique, d'irréductible, et finalement de valable, dans chaque tempérament et dans chaque destin.<sup>50</sup>

Yourcenar conflates the meanings of 'révolte' and 'acceptation', in the same way that she blurs the border between 'liberté' and 'soumission'. The poem by Cavafy, which she quotes in French in her own and C. Dimaras's translation, is about saying 'le grand OUI ou le grand NON', and assuming the responsibility for this choice. Cavafy is equally vague as Yourcenar with regard to what it is that one accepts or refuses. His poem, however, finishes by identifying refusing as an unambiguous and conscious choice by the individual: 'Celui qui a refusé ne regrette rien : si on l'interrogeait de nouveau, il répéterait NON – et cependant ce NON, ce juste NON, l'accable pendant toute sa vie.'<sup>51</sup> Yourcenar interprets this 'non' as part of a greater 'oui' that does justice to the uniqueness of the individual. In her assessment, she does not side with the person who has to choose, but with the poet, whose function is to express what is at stake in that choice. The poet's *a priori* accepting attitude allows him to see that existential, ideological, ethical or other choices are always about historically specific ways of systematizing and conceptualizing reality, which one may embrace or reject. Such choices, however right (*justes*) or devastating

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<sup>49</sup> EM, p. 156.

<sup>50</sup> EM, p. 156.

<sup>51</sup> EM, p. 157, emphasis in the original.

(*accablants*), are always between concepts and systems of interpretation. It is only the poet who, by recognizing and accepting this state of affairs, places himself beyond such choices and demonstrates the gap that defines man's relationship with nature and with himself. By doing so, the poet refuses to reduce individuals into types or identities defined by the systems of interpretation which they accept or reject. Thus, according to Yourcenar (though, I suspect, not necessarily according to this specific poem by Cavafy), the poet's 'acquiescement' contains 'révolte' in the sense that he resists the temptation to standardize individuality and does so by accepting the impossibility of self-identity. The poet's privileged vantage point ensures his 'liberté d'acquiescement', through which the uniqueness of every individual and their irreducibility to a prescribed 'identity' is attested.

Acceptance and revolt remain central in Yourcenar's thought, as the frequency with which she returns to these themes attests. For example, writing about Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* in 1956, she notes: 'À partir de cette vision de l'horreur intrinsèque, toutes les avenues de l'esprit pourraient s'ouvrir pour Hans, celle de la sainteté ou celle du crime, celle de la révolte ou celle de l'acceptation.'<sup>52</sup> Yourcenar's 1972 essay on André Gide also contains a reference to 'révolte et acceptation', in the context of 'le drame du choix perpétuel entre le refus du soi et l'abandon à soi'.<sup>53</sup> In a more political vein, in a footnote to her published interviews with Rosbo, she specified that accepting is 'a noble act' when it concerns the self, but not when it concerns the suffering of others: 'trop de chrétiens [...] ont accepté sans difficulté les malheurs d'autrui, attribués à la volonté de Dieu.'<sup>54</sup> Thus, for Yourcenar, the terms acceptance and revolt resonate with both political and existential significance. In her essay on Cavafy, Yourcenar brought together all these elements in such a way that the opposition between 'révolte' and 'acceptation' was transcended.

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<sup>52</sup> *EM*, p. 173.

<sup>53</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar, 'André Gide revisited', in *Cahiers André Gide*, 3, Le Centenaire (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp. 21-44, (p. 32).

<sup>54</sup> Rosbo, p. 137.

The paradoxical understanding of revolt as part of acceptance is further supported by Yourcenar's rejection of the conventional idea of revolt in politics, ideology or even art and literature – a rejection repeated on different occasions. With regard to historical revolutions, she pointed out to Matthieu Galey: 'Je n'idolâtre pas les révolutions. Elles produisent finalement leurs réactions, plus virulentes encore, et presque inévitablement elles s'enlisent aussi dans des sociétés fonctionnalisées, hiérarchisées, et pour finir dans des "goulags"'.<sup>55</sup> Yourcenar clearly believes that revolt against a system of ideas or a mechanism of production of meaning inevitably reproduces new systems of representation which are based on analogous structures and hierarchies. This idea tallies with her perception of history as a series of (mis)representations of reality. What remains stable is the impulse and the ability for representation, which Yourcenar suggests that we should accept as a constitutive attribute of our being, rather than renounce in the search for identity.

Yourcenar's idiosyncratic reading of Cavafy's poem *Che fece... il grand rifiuto* may not be sufficiently backed by evidence in that particular poem, but does convey well Cavafy's general poetic and intellectual stance. Like E.M. Forster, who once described Cavafy as a gentleman standing 'motionless at a slight angle to the universe', Yourcenar looks at the Greek poet as being partly outside the world and its representations and partly absorbed by them.<sup>56</sup> With reference to the presence of religion in Cavafy's poetry, she remarks:

La même absence de révolte permet à Cavafy de se mouvoir avec aisance au sein de son hérité orthodoxe, et fait de lui, en définitive, un chrétien. Chrétien aussi éloigné que possible du tourment, de l'effusion de cœur, ou de la rigueur ascétique, mais chrétien pourtant, puisque *religio*, au sens antique du terme, aussi bien que *mystica*, se trouve faire partie de l'univers du christianisme.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Les Yeux ouverts*, p. 309-10.

<sup>56</sup> Mentioned in Judith Scherer Herz, 'The Remaking of the Past in Forster's Non-Fiction', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 31, No. 2/3, E. M. Forster Issue (Summer 1985), pp. 287-296, (p. 291).

<sup>57</sup> *EM*, p. 157.



The absence of revolt leads to what Yourcenar specified above as ‘le cas extrême et personnel où il y aurait révolte à ne pas se révolter’. This is because through a poetic negotiation with Christianity, Cavafy replaces dogma and emotional sublimation with the mystical element of *religio* ‘au sens antique du terme’. Yourcenar made a similar comment in *Les Yeux ouverts*, referring to the Shinto religion:

C’est justement la splendeur des cérémonies, le rite, le sentiment du sacré qui est important, parce qu’il [...] montre dans toute leur beauté les gestes de la vie. [...] Je crois que [fuir cette beauté] c’est méconnaître le sens des religions, c’est-à-dire ‘ce qui relie’, comme nous l’avons déjà dit. Il s’agit de relier l’homme à tout ce qui est, a été, et sera.<sup>58</sup>

Yourcenar suggests here that access to ourselves and the world is possible through the ceremony and the rite, that is, through acts of representation. While art evidently does not ensure unmediated unity between the subject and the world, it establishes a relationship (‘relier’) between them, which, as I have argued, is differential in character. To refuse representation (‘fuir cette beauté’) would constitute an act of revolt against aesthetic mediation. This, Yourcenar stresses in the above passage, would be a misapprehension of our relationship with being (‘tout ce qui est, a été, et sera’) – a relationship which is not to be understood in terms of absolute identity, but in terms of a difference, a link (‘relier’, *religio*).

Cavafy’s poetry and Shinto ceremonies share a common understanding of representation and the mission of art. Art fails in its main objective to structure and systematize the world (which is also the objective of philosophy, historiography and politics, as we saw). Through this failure, art reveals the limits of the subject, the fleetingness of the world and the perpetual difference that separates the two. If the world manifests itself through this failure and this difference, then the artist must accept this state of affairs and use art in order to delineate better the nature of this difference. In this sense, Cavafy’s poetry is, for Yourcenar, both an act of liberation

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<sup>58</sup> *Les Yeux ouverts*, pp. 38-39.

and ‘une manière de soumission à la nature de choses.’<sup>59</sup> The main benefit from adopting the attitude of accepting is the recovery of an original relationship between man and world, confirmed by the return to the original signification of words (*religio*, *mystica*). This does not involve returning to a paradisiacal state of immediacy; quite to the contrary, it involves recognizing the permanent displacement of the subject in relation to the world and itself.

The restorative function of accepting is illustrated by Yourcenar in her short essay ‘Sur un rêve de Dürer’. This essay is about a watercolour by Dürer called ‘The Vision’ which depicts an apocalyptic dream he had during a night of June 1525, with terrible columns of water falling ponderously from the heavens and flooding the earth. Dürer accompanied his watercolour with an explanatory text, which intrigues Yourcenar’s imagination. The point that interests me here is Yourcenar’s commentary on the final sentence of Dürer’s text – a sentence which is not semantically connected with the rest of the writing: ‘Dieu tourne pour le mieux toutes choses.’<sup>60</sup> Yourcenar stresses Dürer’s religiousness and then meditates on this ‘formule pieuse’:

Elle peut au choix s’interpréter comme une formule propitiatoire quasi machinale, assertion plus ou moins sincère d’un optimisme fondé sur la bienveillance divine, aussi peu concluante qu’un distrait signe de croix, ou, au contraire, comme un acte de soumission très réfléchi à l’ordre des choses, partout caractéristique de tout grand esprit authentiquement religieux, Marc Aurèle acceptant ce que veut l’univers, Lao-tseu d’accord avec le vide et Confucius avec le Ciel.<sup>61</sup>

Yourcenar wonders whether Dürer’s declaration of faith originates in his candid, ingenuous affirmation of religion or, ‘au contraire’, in his thoughtful, philosophical acceptance of it. Authentic religiosity, Yourcenar notes, consists in the ability to submit oneself to the order of things. However, if, for Yourcenar, *religio* means above all ‘relation’, as I just suggested, then to be ‘authentiquement religieux’ is to

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<sup>59</sup> *EM*, p. 157.

<sup>60</sup> *EM*, p. 318. ‘Sur un rêve de Dürer’ (written in 1977) is included in Marguerite Yourcenar, *Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur*.

<sup>61</sup> *EM*, p. 320.

have an authentic relationship with the world. Therefore, their ability to submit to the order of things makes it possible for Marcus Aurelius, Lao-Tzu and Confucius to enjoy an authentic relationship with them. In this context, Yourcenar concedes that there is in fact no contrast between sophisticated and candid acceptance:

Mais cet ‘au contraire’ est de trop. Nous devinons que la confiance ingénue et l’adhésion impersonnelle se rejoignent quelque part, à des profondeurs de la nature humaine où le principe de la contradiction ne pénètre pas. Telle quelle, cette *mantra* chrétienne a sans doute aidé Dürer à émerger indemne de son terrible songe.

Dürer was saved from his terrible dream thanks to his accepting attitude, whose nature is not exclusively Christian, as the expression ‘*mantra chrétienne*’ intimates. Yourcenar claims that Dürer’s authentic acceptance is more deeply-seated and original than the contradictions which cost him a night terror. These contradictions are not reconciled by him, but continue to torment him. Yet, to the extent that he accepts these contradictions, he manages to place himself beyond them and emerge undamaged from this adventure. As in the case of Cavafy, to accept means to reclaim a position of authenticity which does not cancel contradiction and conflict.<sup>62</sup>

Significantly, Yourcenar stresses the realism of Dürer’s sketch and textual annotation to it. ‘Ce rêve frappa par une absence totale de symboles.’ ‘Le visionnaire est un réaliste [...]. Sa précision est d’un physicien. Dès le choc de la première trombe d’eau, il a essayé de mesurer à quelle distance il se trouvait du point de frappe.’ Indeed, Dürer mentions in his text that he was at a distance of four leagues from the point of the first downpour, and this is also how he painted it. Yourcenar considers this as a sign of an exquisite humanism: ‘le meilleur de la notion d’humanisme [est] inclu dans cette capacité, même en rêve et au sein d’une sorte

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<sup>62</sup> Writing on Yourcenar’s ‘Sur un rêve de Dürer’, Nigel Saint proposes to look at this image and text by Dürer as one work. The torrent of water threatens to dissolve not only the land on which it falls, but also Dürer’s watercolour itself, as well as Dürer’s writing, placed right underneath the image. Saint observes: ‘Water and colour pigment in the watercolour are the substances now undergoing dissolution. [...] The writing stands in an ambiguous spatial relationship to the wash [...]; [it] is about to receive the impact of the water.’ In this sense, Dürer’s accepting attitude does not only save the artist himself from terror; it also protects his work from dissolution. Nigel Saint, *Marguerite Yourcenar, Reading the Visual* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), p. 40.

d'angoisse ontologique, de continuer de jauger.'<sup>63</sup> Now this gauging of the distance between Dürer and the downpour is precisely what Yourcenar describes as the pragmatism and realism at the heart of the existential experience. Dürer stands in fear and anxiety in front of a world which remains incomprehensible and with which he cannot identify. His task as an artist is not to repress or interpret this spectacle, but to accept it and 'measure the distance' that separates him from it. Measuring the distance is similar to Yourcenar's narrative technique of closing in on the gap ('cerner la lacune') which separates man from the world and from his own being.<sup>64</sup> In both painting and writing, realism aims at gauging the distance between the self and the world. It confirms the alienating gap within the self and resists the temptation of conceptual reduction and rationalization. According to Yourcenar, this is what Cavafy does by embracing Christianity (but also other, ostensibly contradictory, schematizations of reality, such as Greek hedonism and even nihilism).<sup>65</sup> This is also what Thomas Mann and Flaubert do, when they describe, the first, the Munich station timetables, and the second, Madame Bovary's wedding dinner. According to Yourcenar, Piranesi and Mishima also share a similar perception of the function of realism.<sup>66</sup> These writers and artists do not understand themselves as original creators or thinkers but as craftsmen:

La position du poète reste celle d'un artisan exquis ; sa fonction se limite à donner à la plus brûlante et à la plus chaotique des matières la plus nette et la plus lisse des formes. Nulle part l'art n'est considéré comme plus réel ou plus noble que la réalité. [...] Art et vie s'entraident l'un l'autre.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> These passages from *EM*, p. 319-20.

<sup>64</sup> Claude Foucart makes a similar point with reference to Yourcenar's essay on Dürer: 'Saisir l'authenticité [...], c'est d'abord apprécier très précisément cette distance qui sépare les êtres.' Foucart focuses on the distance that separates the writer from her fictional characters, whereas I am interested in the existential-ontological distance between the self and the world. Foucart, p. 267.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. *EM*, p. 157.

<sup>66</sup> I am referring here to Yourcenar's monographs 'Le Cerveau noir de Piranèse' (written in 1959-61, in *Sous bénéfice d'inventaire*) and *Mishima ou la Vision du vide* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), also included in *EM*.

<sup>67</sup> *EM*, p. 158

The mission of art, as this passage from Yourcenar's essay on Cavafy suggests, is to set up a context in and through which reality in its chaotic consistency may manifest itself. It is clear that the artist as craftsman is better placed than the philosopher to achieve this goal – although we should always bear in mind Yourcenar's own preconceptions against philosophy and critical thought. It is further suggested that pure artistic originality, whether as sublimation or as suppression of the disorder or things, is beyond the scope of art and has nothing true to say about reality.

While Cavafy, along with Piranesi, Dürer and Thomas Mann are characteristic cases of the artist as craftsman, perhaps the most graphic portrait of the artist as original creator in Yourcenar's work is that of a fictional character, Wang-Fô, in her short story 'Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé'. This is the story of a painter who 'aimait l'image des choses, et non les choses elles-mêmes'.<sup>68</sup> The emperor of the land of Han, who grew up surrounded only by Wang-Fô's paintings, believing that his empire would be as beautiful as them, arrests him one day and accuses him of lying: 'Tu m'as menti, Wang-Fô, vieux imposteur : le monde n'est qu'un amas de taches confuses, jetées sur le vide par un peintre insensé, sans cesse effacées par nos larmes.'<sup>69</sup> Wang-Fô may have been arrested, but he is the one who holds the emperor hostage in his representations: '[Tes] sortilèges', says the emperor, 'm'ont dégoûté de ce que je possède, et donné le désir de ce que je ne posséderai pas.'<sup>70</sup> Wang-Fô's punishment is to have his eyes burnt and his hands cut off, so as not to deceive through his art any longer. Yourcenar implies that there is an element of justice in this punishment, although she saves Wang-Fô at the end. He escapes in his imaginary world, inside one of his paintings. This enigmatic tale is as much about the power of art to generate its own space and create the illusion of redemption, as it is about the

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<sup>68</sup> OR, p. 1171. Written in 1936, 'Comment Wang-Fô fut sauvé' opens Yourcenar's *Nouvelles Orientales* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), a collection of short stories.

<sup>69</sup> OR, p. 1177.

<sup>70</sup> OR, p. 1178.

failure of pure creativity to demonstrate the ways in which man is related to the world.

Imprisoned within the confines of a sublimated reality, the emperor of the land of Han contrasts sharply with Hadrien, the emperor of *Mémoires*, whose freedom is summed up in the phrase ‘je voulais l’état où j’étais’. The ‘liberté d’acquiescement’ is above all the existential freedom which comes from acknowledging that our access to reality passes necessarily through art in the broad sense of representation and that this art is doomed to fail in its constitutive goal to depict the world. The art of realism, a humbler art, as it were, whose aspiration is not to reflect reality, but to reproduce its distortions in the artistic or literary work, is one of Hadrien’s tools in the search for self-authentication, a *technique de liberté*.

It is significant that this is a *technique* and not a philosophy or a system of analysis. Like Dürer and Cavafy, Hadrien is depicted by Yourcenar as a consummate craftsman, a ‘physicien’, gauging the distance between what he writes and what he experiences, sees or imagines. As Yourcenar writes with regard to narrative in the first person, ‘une telle forme littéraire [...] oblige [le lecteur] à redresser les événements et les êtres vus à travers le personnage qui dit *je* comme des objets vus à travers l’eau’.<sup>71</sup> This passage explains among other things that there is no pretension of immediacy in the realist text. On the contrary, by deflecting ‘les êtres et les événements’, the realist narrative points to its failure and, at the same time, to the presence of an obscure area (a gap, a distance) that can only be depicted in terms of distortion or refraction. Yourcenar hopes that this process authenticates both the realist work of art and the artist. It authenticates *Mémoires* as a novel by Yourcenar, but also as a text supposedly narrated by Hadrien. At the same time, as a *technique de*

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<sup>71</sup> Preface of *Le Coup de grâce*, OR, p. 81, Yourcenar’s emphasis. The preface was written in 1962. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Le Coup de grâce* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939), for the first edition in a separate volume.

*liberté*, realist narrative authenticates the narrator himself, who closes in on the gap within the self, thus confirming this gap and acknowledging its unrepresentability.

## Politics as a technique of authentication

If individual existence is freed and authenticated through realist art, then freedom and authenticity should also be possible to achieve at the level of politics. This is Hadrien's assumption in his political and cultural work, to which I will refer in more detail in the next chapter. Yourcenar's understanding of freedom and the aesthetic character of our personal relationship with the world already allows some preliminary thoughts with regard to her perception of politics. Politics is a form of representation *par excellence*, because it organizes our relationship with reality according to concrete structures, plans and visions. Inasmuch as this relationship is always mediated by concepts, it is also mediated by politics as the art of managing and manipulating these concepts. Like any form of mediation, politics not only establishes, but also distorts the relationship between the subject or the community and the world. Yourcenar's critique of oversystematization, ideology, dogma and so forth extends to those political systems which are based on extreme interpretations of reality. As she points out in *Les Yeux ouverts*:

Aucun rêve de perfection n'est à jamais réalisé sans entraîner aussi la violence et l'erreur. [...] Un communiste idéal serait divin. Mais un monarque éclairé, comme le souhaite Voltaire, serait également divin. Seulement où sont-ils ? [...] Les monarchistes français] ne voient pas que leur roi ferait aussitôt appel à l'équivalent de M. Giscard d'Estaing ou de M. Mitterrand à la tête de son ministère, et que le bureau de poste serait tenu par le même employé, ou son sosie. Le capitaliste technocrate qui prétend établir le bonheur sur la terre par ses moyens d'apprenti sorcier me paraît d'ailleurs du même ordre.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> *Les Yeux ouverts*, p. 120.

This criticism reproduces at the level of politics many elements of Yourcenar's perception of art. She claims that, in principle, she would not object to an ideal form of political representation, only such a form is not possible. Every political mediation between man and the world inevitably leaves behind a trail of error and violence. This is particularly true of systems intending to establish a relationship of total equivalence between man and the world, namely, totalitarian systems, such as communism and monarchy. Interestingly, Yourcenar asserts that technocratic capitalism is also such a system: its 'sorcery' is 'of the same order'. All these systems miscalculate the constitutive non-ideality of the subject, symbolized in the above passage – rightly or wrongly – by Mitterrand and the post office employee. These systems attempt to impose an identity between man and the world, which is always proved fictional and wrong.<sup>73</sup> *Mémoires d'Hadrien* provides Yourcenar's answer to the question of leadership and politics. She imagines a poetic-political rearrangement of reality which takes into account the unavoidable distortions brought about by political representation. Hadrien's goal is not to create a new and original political system, but to accept and maintain the existing political order and pacify the empire, without imposing speculative interpretations of political or existential subjectivity. As we saw, Hadrien's idea of liberty is based not on a philosophy, but on a technique. His politics is one way of implementing this technique. It aspires to be a 'pragmatic' and 'realist' politics of accepting the differential and incomplete relationship between the subject and the world.

Hadrien's 'technique de l'homme libre' invites various types of interpretation, several of which will be attempted in my thesis. Apart from questions of internal theoretical consistency, this aesthetic determination of freedom will be interrogated

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<sup>73</sup> The same views are expressed in *Mishima ou la Vision du vide*, where Yourcenar writes: 'L'erreur grave du Mishima de quarante-trois ans [...] est de n'avoir pas vu que, même si le visage de Sa Majesté resplendissait de nouveau dans le soleil levant, le monde des « ventres pleins », du plaisir « éventé » et de l'innocence « vendue » resterait le même ou se reformerait, et que même Zaibatsu, sans lequel un État moderne ne saurait subsister, y reprendrait sa place prépondérante, sous le même nom, ou d'autres noms.' *EM*, pp. 257-58.



in relation to the context of its enunciation, to wit, the immediate post-war period. The possibility of freedom is indeed historicized by Yourcenar, but in relation to the context of its reference, the Roman Empire. Early in the 'Carnets de notes de *Mémoires d'Hadrien*', she notes:

Retrouvé dans un volume de la correspondance de Flaubert, fort lu et fort souligné par moi vers 1927, la phrase inoubliable : 'Les dieux n'étant plus, et le Christ n'étant pas encore, il y a eu, de Cicéron à Marc Aurèle, un moment unique où l'homme seul a été.'<sup>74</sup>

Man's solitude is also man's freedom. The quotation from Flaubert has a strongly negative and a strongly positive connotation. It suggests that there was a period of nihilism in antiquity, where man was unaided by the divine element and therefore had no point of reference or standard of validity. But this period is also one of freedom, in the sense of the development of a humanist conscience which allowed man to question his representations and, as I argued, to manipulate them towards the goal of self-authentication. Thus, the choice of the narrative subject of *Mémoires* has to do with this unique historical conjuncture where, as Yourcenar's readers have noticed, the divine and the human elements coincide.<sup>75</sup> What is at stake in the novel is precisely man's ability to resist the temptation to play god, to reject the idea of filling the historical-ontological gap with new representations and to use this occasion to assert humanity in terms of difference and incompleteness. Further, there is no doubt that Yourcenar establishes a link between, on the one hand, nihilism and the possibility of freedom which Flaubert discerned in the period of the *Pax Romana*, and on the other, the historical and cultural conditions that prevailed in Europe after the Second World War.

The choice of historical time has yet another implication. As I pointed out already, Yourcenar understands history as a palimpsest of interpretations and

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<sup>74</sup> OR, p. 519.

<sup>75</sup> See, for instance, C. Frederick Farrell, Jr and Edith R. Farrell, 'Un lien entre l'humain et le sacré : Le nom de dieu', in Remy Poignault (ed.), *Le Sacré dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar* (Tours: SIEY, 1993), pp. 163-173, (especially pp. 171-72).

conceptualizations of 'le vécu'. On this topic and with reference to the historical setting of *Denier du rêve*, Yourcenar's novel on fascist Italy, Nadia Harris makes the following remark: 'Nous sommes dans un univers où les médiations symboliques sont devenues le relais incontournable du sens et d'où l'immédiateté, l'intuition ont disparu, balayées par une culture millénaire qui ne conçoit de relation au monde que fondée sur l'intelligibilité et la raison [...]'.<sup>76</sup> Harris posits an original state of immediacy that precedes temporally the 'millenary' process of rationalization and rhetorization of experience. I do not think that this assumption is fully justified, since, for Yourcenar, art has always mediated and intellectualized man's relationship with the world. This aside, Harris's comment successfully highlights Yourcenar's conviction that the quest for freedom is more and more encumbered by imaginary representations, as history builds upon itself. This means that existential and political freedom is a possibility for Hadrien more than it is for modern man. If we take into account Flaubert's comment above, it becomes clear that Hadrien represents a narrative subject which is ideally placed before an exceptional historical situation: he has a unique chance of uncovering the layers of interpretation which conceal his true relationship with the world. The novel suggests strongly that Hadrien insisted on the instability and inconclusiveness of this relationship and thus managed to reclaim his personal liberty and authenticity.

In this chapter I argued that Yourcenar associates the problematics of existence and that of politics with the question of aesthetics and representation. Beginning with a reading of the first chapter of *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, and drawing evidence from other fictional and critical works by Yourcenar, I attempted to show how the representational character of the subject's relationship with the world affects its sense

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<sup>76</sup> Nadia Harris, 'Représentations de l'Autre dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar', in Jean-Philippe Beaulieu, *et al.* (eds), *Marguerite Yourcenar, Écritures de l'autre* (Quebec: XYZ, 1997), pp. 45-52, (p. 46).

of selfhood and denies its autonomy. I proposed that Yourcenar considers the subject's entrapment within conceptual structures as both an impasse which frustrates the search for identity and an opening through which to reclaim freedom and authenticity on the basis of difference. While the subject cannot, and should not attempt to, rid itself from art and representation, Yourcenar suggests that it can arrange these representations in such a way as to acknowledge and accept its permanent lack of identity with the world and itself. Realism in narrative and pragmatism in politics are the two forms this arrangement assumes. Whatever Yourcenar's reservations vis-à-vis philosophy in general, this is undoubtedly a complex philosophical task. It is also one which brings her close to 20<sup>th</sup>-Century existentialism and poststructuralism, as I will discuss in the chapters that follow.

The human and the political subjects which we expect to emerge from *Mémoires d'Hadrien* challenge the conventional perception of subjectivity as full and unfailing presence to oneself. We expect Hadrien as an individual and as a political subject to emerge free from the quest for identity, and accepting his constitutive insufficiency as part of his authenticity. The same should be true of the novel, *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, whose narrative authenticity depends on whether it indeed acknowledges the limits of the realism it employs. In the following chapters, I shall examine the ways in which Yourcenar determines this fragmented, differential subjectivity and whether she succeeds in the existential as well as the political arena.

## CHAPTER TWO

### TEMPORALITY, IRONY AND THE INVERSION OF AUTHENTICITY

In the 1990 conference *Roman, histoire et mythe dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar*, Antoine Wyss underlined succinctly the relationship between Hadrien's guiding rule of *acquiescement* (Wyss writes: 'accueil') and his technique of manipulation of symbols and other mechanisms of representation:

La lucidité d'Hadrien [...] est une lucidité d'accueil, qui accepte toutes les paroles, toutes les pensées, tous les symboles, qui leur reconnaît un sens ou une valeur, mais en même temps regarde au-delà, leur refusant la qualité d'absolu [...]. Hadrien apparaît ainsi comme un grand manipulateur de symboles, au sens large de tout ce qui, dans la culture humaine, engendre des significations et sert de support aux valeurs, de référence aux pensées. Il peut s'agir de mots, de concepts, de systèmes, d'entités surnaturelles, de mythes et de dieux, il peut s'agir aussi de lois, d'usages, d'institutions ou de bâtiments, en tant qu'ils représentent quelque chose de plus qu'eux-mêmes. Toutes ces puissances [...] à partir desquelles la plupart des hommes pensent, et auxquelles leur pensée s'arrête ou retourne, Hadrien les considère pour elles-mêmes et les unes par rapport aux autres, il pense à elles et à travers elles.<sup>1</sup>

This comment is valid as far as both Hadrien's politics and his perception of subjectivity are concerned. It points to the nihilism that permeates *Mémoires*, in the sense of the absence of a point of reference for the systems of values and ideas employed by Hadrien in his role as emperor and cultural reformer. It also supports

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<sup>1</sup> Antoine Wyss, 'Auteur, narrateur, personnage : Quelle historiographie pour *Mémoires d'Hadrien*?', in Simone et Maurice Delcroix (eds), *Roman, histoire et mythe dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar* (Tours: SIEY, 1995), pp. 483-491, (p. 488).

the idea that, for Yourcenar, the subject's relationship with the world is always overdetermined by various systems of signification. Wyss groups all these systems under the term 'symbols', thus implying that the mediation between the self and the world is rhetorical in character. This idea will be further pursued in this chapter.

Manipulation of symbols, as a political and existential *technique*, implies the possibility of authenticity. As I have already suggested, authenticity in *Mémoires* should not be construed as the return to an original state of unity before any rhetorical mediation; it should rather be understood as a form of engagement with the world in which the impossibility of identity is taken into account. Man and the world may belong factually together, but from the point of view of the self, which is that of *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, the gap separating them cannot be bridged. As I will argue in this and the following chapters, Yourcenar subverts the semantics of authenticity, purity and, to an extent, humanism, in such a way that these terms assume the opposite to their conventional meaning. The ideas of 'man' and 'humanity' are to be understood in terms of man's particularity among other entities to exist in a differential relationship with the world. To be sure, the way Yourcenar subverts the semantic content of metaphysically charged words must be investigated and the philosophical meaning and consequences of this semantic subversion must be questioned. I propose to begin this investigation in the present chapter by examining first how Hadrien's technique of manipulation of rhetoric is implemented, how it is associated with his cultural work and in what sense it can be said that it authenticates his politics.

## Constructing and reconstructing

It was Yourcenar herself who defined politics as an art of manipulation in *Les Yeux ouverts*. During her interviews with Galey, she stressed that a good statesman-leader

is a ‘manipulateur de génie’. She also called Hadrien un ‘grand metteur en scène’ and, metaphorically, ‘un joueur de poker’.<sup>2</sup> As these analogies intimate, Yourcenar understands statesmanship as the re-casting of pre-existing values and symbols in an effort to form new and more functional representations. Strictly speaking, there is no element of pure creativity in this process; rather, there is the determination to remain consciously under the sign of representation. This is evident in Hadrien’s work as a founder and co-designer of temples and cities. These are conceived as artefacts through which man’s relationship with nature is both confirmed and mediated. Thus, on the one hand, Hadrien considers these cities as an intentional reproduction of natural order:

Plotinopolis, Adrinople, Antinoé, Hadrianothères... J’ai multiplié le plus possible ces ruches de l’abeille humaine.

And further down:

La ville : le cadre, la construction humaine, monotone si l’on veut, mais comme sont monotones les cellules de cire bourrées de miel, le lieu des contacts et des échanges, l’endroit où les paysans viennent pour vendre leurs produits et s’attardent pour regarder bouche bée les peintures d’un portique...<sup>3</sup>

The analogy with the beehive suggests that Hadrien’s cities are modelled on nature. They constitute organic extensions of it, and in this sense they conform to the novel’s programmatic injunction, as it were, that discipline should assist nature in its work. The image of the peasant who comes to the city and is impressed by urban art and architecture illustrates the historical movement from nature to the representation of nature. The city is the scene on which the meaning of nature is revealed to man. Hadrien, as the founder of cities is the ‘metteur en scène’.

Yet on the other hand, in the same paragraph, Yourcenar writes that the city is aesthetically opposed to nature:

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<sup>2</sup> *Les Yeux ouverts*, pp. 158, 162 and 155 respectively.

<sup>3</sup> *OR*, p. 386.

Dans un monde encore plus qu'à demi dominé par les bois, le désert, la plaine en friche, c'est un beau spectacle qu'une rue dallée, un temple à n'importe quel dieu, des bains et des latrines publiques, la boutique où le barbier discute avec ses clients les nouvelles de Rome.<sup>4</sup>

While this statement does not contradict the previous argument about the city as an image of nature, it shows that there is no identity between the human and the natural. The city mediates and therefore establishes the connection between the two, but at the same time, as an image and a construction, it refuses it. The aesthetic representation – whether it is a painting on a portico, a temple or the city itself - confirms the link *and* determines the distance between man and nature.

Importantly, this link is characterized by Yourcenar as beautiful, 'un beau spectacle'. 'Beauty' is never without concrete meaning in Yourcenar and it is worth tracing its presence in her text as a direct reference to the fundamentally aesthetic, and therefore 'un-natural', relationship between man and world. In the above passage Yourcenar asserts that beauty defines the difference between the human and the natural. This is a conclusion that also Léo Belmonte draws in *Un homme obscur*, when he notes that man has exhausted himself in the effort to represent conceptually the world. As we saw in Chapter 1, he concludes by saying, 'Mais c'est beau'. In Belmonte's philosophical world, the encounter with beauty has no practical value. On the contrary, for Hadrien, beauty is a way of implementing a politics that recognizes difference. One of his emblematic statements in the novel reads as follows: 'Je me sentais responsable de la beauté du monde'.<sup>5</sup> More than a simple declaration of love for beauty, this phrase summarizes the way Hadrien understands politics and indeed subjectivity. The pursuit of beauty, harmony and order, reveals the mutual belonging of man and nature not in terms of identity but in terms of difference. Further, to be responsible for beauty means to be a master artist who re-

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<sup>4</sup> OR, p. 386.

<sup>5</sup> OR, p. 390.

arranges and manipulates symbolic and aesthetic values with an aim to demonstrate this incommensurability.

The most important way in which difference becomes apparent to Hadrien is through the gradual undoing of the work of art in time and in history. The work of art has to be understood in the broadest possible sense of 'la construction humaine', which includes the aesthetic object, but also cities and the Roman Empire itself. As the work of art changes or perishes with time, it transforms into a new representation, an image of difference produced by both man and nature. For example, the city of Rome is not considered in the novel as an objective aesthetic reflection of a stable historical and political reality, but as the representation of historical change: 'Rome : [...] la preuve visible des changements et des recommencements de l'histoire'.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the city slowly becomes the work of time, rather than that of poetic fiction. It slips into a different temporality from that which it was initially meant to embody, and transforms into a complete presentation of reality.

Hadrien's goal as a manipulator of symbols and representations is to include in the production of art the thought of time which is the agent of disintegration. Thus, with reference to building materials, he notes:

À Rome, j'utilisais de préférence la brique éternelle, qui ne retourne que très lentement à la terre dont elle est née, et dont le tassement, ou l'effritement imperceptible, se fait de telle manière que l'édifice reste montagne alors même qu'il a cessé d'être visiblement une forteresse, un cirque, ou une tombe. En Grèce, en Asie, j'employais le marbre natal, la belle substance qui une fois taillée demeure fidèle à la mesure humaine, si bien que le plan du temple tout entier reste contenu dans chaque fragment de tambour brisé.<sup>7</sup>

This is an example of Hadrien's technique of manipulation through which desire for order co-exists with the certainty of natural decay. The choice of building materials is ultimately based on the prospect of the destruction of art. Evidently, this contradicts the logic of the symbol and that of representation. This does not mean that the

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<sup>6</sup> OR, p. 418.

<sup>7</sup> OR, p. 385.



symbolic function of the edifices that Hadrien builds - for example, their reference to divine or institutional authority - is refused or subverted. As I stressed above, Hadrien is not a rebel, but a statesman who accepts symbols and conventional significations. This is why he becomes founder, patron and designer of temples and cities. However, after being delivered to time, as it were, these symbols serve to reveal a broader ironic context, in which their insufficiency as representations is made evident. Symbolic value and ironic awareness of difference share the same space and time. By combining the two, Hadrien remains constant to his programme to coordinate 'volonté' and 'destin', representation and its undoing.

In *Mémoires d'Hadrien* there are many references to Hadrien's activity as a manipulator of the symbolic value of artworks and institutions, several of which will be discussed in my thesis. In the present context, I shall discuss one more example, that of the erection of the Olympeion in Athens. In the novel, this temple is considered an architectural success, and it is charged with religious and cultural meaning. In addition to its function as a place of worship of Zeus, for Hadrien, it symbolizes 'le mariage de Rome et d'Athènes' and the rebirth of Greece after a long period of decline. Soon after its dedication, however, Hadrien recontextualizes this temple by seeing it from the perspective of its future decline: 'Ce fut alors qu'une mélancolie d'un instant me serra le cœur : je songeais que les mots d'achèvement, de perfection, contiennent en eux le mot de fin : peut-être n'avais-je fait qu'offrir une proie de plus au Temps dévorateur'.<sup>8</sup> The ironic effect of time is here contemplated with sadness, as Hadrien remembers that pure creativity and the establishment of stable symbolic values are not possible. In fact, in *Mémoires*, Hadrien is neither a pure manipulator nor a pure creator of art and symbols, but oscillates often violently between the two. His 'impurity' is part of Yourcenar's definition of what it is to be human. In the passage quoted above, he suggests that the relationship between the

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<sup>8</sup> *OR*, pp. 422-23.

two stages through which the artefact passes, that of its making and that of its unmaking, is not dialectical. The first stage is that of creation, stabilization, and the quest for identity, while the second stage is that of fragmentation, contingency and the affirmation of difference. The final authentication of the work of art is not a synthesis of the two stages, but the manifestation of difference in the spectacle of ruins. If the fragmented work of art represents authentically the relationship between man and nature, it nevertheless does not ensure a place for the subject, which will always remain deficient. At a different part of the novel, but in a similar mood, Yourcenar makes the following remark:

Là où un tisserand rapiécera sa toile, où un calculateur habile corrigerait ses erreurs, où l'artiste retoucherait son chef-d'œuvre encore imparfait ou endommagé à peine, la nature préfère repartir à même l'argile, à même le chaos, et ce gaspillage est ce qu'on nomme l'ordre des choses.<sup>9</sup>

According to Yourcenar, to the extent that artistic intention is intention for beauty and meaning, it will always be frustrated. What is at stake in the novel is the discovery of a form of order that contains disorder and even of a form of (non-)identity which contains conflict. Through his work as a cultural and political reformer, Hadrien investigates the possibility of this new post-metaphysical form of 'identity' for a permanently dislocated subject - whether this is the individual subject or, as we shall see, the political subject, to wit, the Roman Empire.

Now while the primary goal of this chapter is to highlight the sophistication of Yourcenar's unorthodox idea of authentic subjectivity, the risks involved in its definition are not underestimated. Yourcenar attempts to wrest such key terms as beauty, order, humanity and eternity out of their metaphysical context, but the risk of falling back into essentialism, or indeed of never emerging from it, is certainly high. Yourcenar's love for classical beauty and her profound confidence in the possibility of order can only with difficulty be reconciled with what she sees with equal clarity

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<sup>9</sup> *OR*, pp. 475-76.

as man's shapeless facticity in a chaotic world. On the other hand, her fascination with ruins and the idea of decline over time implies an inverted essentialism, that of the decadent, the fleeting and the impure. Of course, there is no reason to question Yourcenar's frankness as she sets out to reach the outer limits of the 'unutterable' ('l'informulé'). However, as this thesis will be unravelling the characteristically modern complexity of the notion of authentic subjectivity in Yourcenar, the stakes inevitably will become higher. Particular ideas, such as the inversion of the meaning of concepts, Hadrien's 'technique of accepting' and his 'manipulation of symbols' will have to prove to be operative in the context of the narrative but also in that of modernity in general. The form of subjectivity which Yourcenar puts forward, and which is supposed to transcend the conventional categories of type and identity will also have to be described with some precision. Finally, this new subject, whose very insufficiency becomes apparent with time and authenticates it, must avoid the character of universality – another of Yourcenar's favourite terms. As we shall see in the last chapter of the thesis, it is the political subject, as Yourcenar imagines it especially in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, and as she projects it upon post-war Europe, that resists almost entirely the 'manipulation' that she proposes. Whatever its degree of failure or success, Yourcenar's paradoxical existential and political thought, which combines conservatism and radicalism, *acceptation* and *révolte*, merits detailed analysis and historical contextualization, which is what I shall be doing in the rest of this chapter and the subsequent ones.

Yourcenar defines positively man's relationship with the world as a collaboration expressed in two forms of action: *construire* and *reconstruire*. Her definitions of these two essentially poetic tasks, well-known among her readers and critics, read as follows:

Construire, c'est collaborer avec la terre : c'est mettre une marque humaine sur un paysage qui en sera modifié à jamais ; c'est contribuer aussi à ce lent changement qui est la vie des villes.

J'ai beaucoup reconstruit : c'est collaborer avec le temps sous son aspect du passé, en saisir ou en modifier l'esprit, lui servir de relais vers un plus long avenir ; c'est retrouver sous les pierres le secret des sources.<sup>10</sup>

Hadrien situates the task of politics and that of aesthetics within the framework of accepting. Constructing and reconstructing are determined as forms of collaboration with what is already given to man, namely, 'la terre' and 'le temps', understood *sensu lato* as the inherited natural and historical space-time. Nevertheless, different aesthetic assumptions and aspirations underlie each of these two forms of action.

The definition of 'construire' implies the ideas of originality and permanence, which are nonetheless constantly challenged in this novel and elsewhere in Yourcenar's work. Especially the phrase 'mettre une marque humaine sur un paysage qui en sera modifié à jamais' situates man in opposition to 'earth', in a way which questions the possibility of 'collaboration'. Yourcenar sexualizes the notion of 'construire', by writing in the same paragraph: 'Creuser des ports, c'était féconder la beauté des golfes'. Thus, the idea of 'construire' can be linked with a phallogentric perception of nature, whereby man leaves a permanent mark on the virgin body of the earth. By the same token, 'construire' can also be linked with a logocentric understanding of artistic intention, as the desire to defy and objectify what is perceived as nature's transience and changeability. In a different context in *Mémoires*, Yourcenar suggests that 'construire' is indeed an act of opposition to time as the agent of difference. In an imaginary but richly nuanced anecdote, she writes that, during a visit to the Egyptian city of Thebes, Hadrien scratched his name on the feet of the Colossus of Memnon. He then realized the frivolousness of this act, and remarked:

L'empereur [...] égratigna dans cette pierre dure quelques lettres grecques, une forme abrégée et familière de son nom : ΑΔΡΙΑΝΟΣ. C'était encore s'opposer au temps : un nom, une somme de vie dont personne ne compterait les éléments innombrables, *une marque laissée par un homme égaré* dans cette succession de siècles.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Both quotations in *OR*, p. 384.

<sup>11</sup> *OR*, p. 445, my emphasis.

‘Construire’ as ‘laisser une marque’ constitutes an act of opposition to time or, to use another of Yourcenar’s terms, an act of revolt. As such, the notion of constructing is related to a violent aesthetic act through which man claims a proper identity for himself. By writing a proper name, ‘ΑΔΡΙΑΝΟΣ’, Hadrien expresses symbolically his desire for absolute coincidence between a unique sign, his name, and a unique referent, his self. Soon, however, this properness is proved to be illusory and the desire for identity is replaced by the certainty of displacement: Hadrien recognizes his situation as that of ‘un homme égaré’. In the strict aesthetic sense of creating, the notion of constructing is thus impossible. Indeed, Hadrien admits elsewhere that ‘même là où j’innovais, j’aimais à me sentir avant tout un continuateur’.<sup>12</sup> As a form of collaboration, constructing signifies merely an intention, rather than an aesthetic or political act of pure creativity. Through the disintegration of the artwork, the artist becomes aware of the inauthenticity of this intention and enters the space of irony.

On the other hand, ‘reconstruire’ is free from metaphysical intention and consists in asserting the repetitive movement of irony. Unlike ‘construire’, it does not refer to an initial ‘mark’, a point of origin, but to the endless succession of mystification and demystification. To reconstruct signifies to acknowledge impermanence and change. As Yourcenar implies, ‘reconstruire’ is authentically temporal in the sense that it prolongs the future and uncovers the past. While in the course of the novel Hadrien struggles between the two roles of ‘constructeur’ and ‘reconstructeur’, it is the latter role which is always depicted as most fitting to his task as emperor and cultural reformer. It would be useful at this point to re-quote Hadrien’s statement after the reconstruction of the Temple of Olympian Zeus in Athens: ‘J’avais collaboré avec les âges, avec la vie grecque elle-même ; [...] le passé retrouvait un visage d’avenir’. Reconstructing is here confirmed again as a form of collaboration with time. Through this collaboration, Hadrien discovers the unity of time in the constancy of difference.

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<sup>12</sup> *OR*, p. 415.

As the celebratory tone of this passage suggests, Yourcenar considers that political and existential identity can be successfully re-defined on the basis of this constancy.

According to this analysis, 'reconstruire' is not the antithesis of 'construire', even if these two terms refer to completely different attitudes towards the world and the self. It is clear that Yourcenar does not see any contradiction between them. As the intention of pure *ex nihilo* creativity, 'construire' pertains to the first stage of the history of the work of art, that of a necessary illusion. This stage involves a degree of mystification and belief in the possibility of re-unification with nature. It is a moment of inauthentic consciousness, which Yourcenar has associated with the notion of 'volonté', the will for identity. This moment is followed by the second stage, the inevitable return of 'destin', which is confirmed in the ironic spectacle of ruins. While the context of irony cannot be transcended, it is possible for man to emerge from it as 'reconstructeur'. This is not the role of the meta-ironist who resigns to the inevitability of decay, or who attempts to prevent it from happening again. The 'reconstructeur' remains within the confines of inauthenticity. Only, as I have suggested, Yourcenar inverts the meaning of authenticity in order to redeem art and politics from within the context of irony. 'Reconstructing' is understood not as the creation, but as the 'manipulation of symbols'; not as an original representation, but as the 'mise en scène' of established values. The succession of 'construire' and 'reconstruire' defines the aesthetic and political task and engenders a specific temporality on which I now propose to focus more closely.

## Irony and authenticity

Paul de Man's influential essay 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' provides a useful frame for understanding better the 'the artistic or philosophical' man's transition from a 'mistaken, mystified assumption' of unity with nature to a 'wiser' stage,

where a 'distance' between the self and 'what is not a self', is established. He calls this transition a 'fall', a word whose theological undertones he recognizes, and which he links to the moment of absolute irony.

The element of falling introduces the specifically comical and ultimately ironical ingredient. [...] The Fall, in the literal as well as the theological sense, reminds [man] of the purely instrumental, reified character of his relationship to nature. Nature can at all times treat him as if he were a thing and remind him of his factitiousness, whereas he is quite powerless to convert even the smallest particle of nature into something human.<sup>13</sup>

De Man states with clarity what in *Mémoires d'Hadrien* is hidden behind the ambivalent definition of 'construire': namely, that it is impossible to leave an inaugural 'marque humaine' on the earth. In de Man's essay, the poet-philosopher is not in a state of ambivalence. On the contrary, he is constantly the victim of his own 'false feeling of pride'.<sup>14</sup> Not unlike Yourcenar, de Man defines this feeling as man's inauthentic reaction to the irreversible effect of time, in a postlapsarian framework, where the distance between the self and the world constitutes the source of the subject's lack of self-identity. In the context of his argument on the prevalence of allegory in early romantic literature, de Man associates the figure of the symbol with the inauthentic sense of time, as a result of the desire for spatial coincidence between the individual symbol and its referent. Further, allegory is linked with 'the unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny', since it confirms the arbitrariness and illegitimacy of the symbol. The distinct temporalities defined by these two figurative modes correspond to the temporalities pertaining to the acts of 'construire' and 'reconstruire'. Evidence supporting this point comes from several key passages from de Man's essay:

The unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny [...] takes place in a subject that has sought refuge against the impact of time in a natural world, to which, in truth, it bears no resemblance. The secularized thought of the pre-romantic period no longer allows the transcendence of the antinomies between the created world and the act of

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<sup>13</sup> 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', in Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1983). All quotations from pp. 213-14.

<sup>14</sup> De Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', p. 214.

creation by means of a positive recourse to the notion of divine will; the failure of the attempt to conceive of a language that would be symbolical as well as allegorical, the suppression in the allegory of the anagogical and the analogical levels is one of the ways in which this impossibility becomes manifest.<sup>15</sup>

De Man points out that the possibility of transcending ‘the antinomies between the created world and the act of creation’ depends on accepting an origin of positive reference. Indeed, the possibility of making an original and permanent ‘marque humaine’ would depend on some form of divine authorization. Were God’s authorization granted to the poet, every individual creation - every ‘construction’ or symbol - would coincide with its meaning through a process of reduction (*anagôgê*) or correspondence (*analogia*). However, both de Man, with regard to romanticism, and Yourcenar, with regard to Rome at the time of Hadrian, assert that the divine will has lost its effectiveness. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, at the beginning of the ‘Carnets de notes’, Yourcenar quotes a passage by Flaubert which emphasizes man’s existential solitude in Hadrian’s time. Further evidence of man’s abandonment by God comes from a powerful and ironic remark by Hadrien apropos of a criticism by his architect, Apollodore. The latter had remarked that the colossal statues of seated gods which Hadrien liked to place inside temples would not be able to stand up, if they so wanted, without breaking the vault. Hadrien had his architect killed: ‘sotte critique [...] Mais les dieux ne se lèvent pas ; ils ne se lèvent ni pour nous avertir, ni pour nous protéger, ni pour nous récompenser, ni pour nous punir. Ils ne se levèrent pas cette nuit-là pour sauver Apollodore.’<sup>16</sup>

Thus abandoned by the gods, man – according to de Man – has to resort to a secular process of naming, based on the negative agency of allegory, the rhetorical figure by which time is introduced in consciousness:

In the world of the symbol [the] relationship [between the image and the substance] is one of simultaneity, which, in truth, is spatial in kind, and in which the intervention of time is merely a matter of contingency, whereas, in the world of allegory, time is the originary constitutive category. The relationship between the allegorical sign and its

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<sup>15</sup> De Man, ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’, pp. 206-7.

<sup>16</sup> *OR*, p. 490-1.



meaning (*signifié*) is not decreed by dogma. [...] We have instead a relationship between signs [which] necessarily contains a constitutive temporal element; it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it. The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the repetition (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term) of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority. The secularized allegory of the early romantics thus necessarily contains [a] negative moment.<sup>17</sup>

For de Man, allegorical meaning is produced as the authentically temporal difference between consecutive signs that no longer perform any symbolic function *per se*. In this difference lies the negativity of allegorical language. In the secularized world of *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, the 'negative moment' is that of reconstruction, since it presupposes the destruction of the symbol which is about to be re-built, and therefore the renouncement of the hope to unite the symbolic image with the substance that it is supposed to represent. For Hadrien, the repetitive movement of reconstruction does not apply only in the literal sense of re-erecting older edifices and reforming institutions. As we have seen in the examples mentioned thus far, the new temples that he builds and the cities that he founds contain a negative moment too. They belong to time as much as they belong to particular locations. These cities and institutions draw their meaning from previous and future constructions of a similar kind. As Antoine Wyss underlines, all of Hadrien's initiatives in the areas of architecture, city planning, state institutions and cultural values remain 'puissances [... qu'Hadrien] considère pour elles-mêmes et les unes par rapport aux autres'. Although temples are dedicated to gods, and cities bear the names of their patrons, these symbolical significations prove to be temporary, as the constructions themselves collapse in time, literally or metaphorically. For this reason, Hadrien considers these values syntagmatically, 'les unes par rapport aux autres', thus allowing for their allegorical meaning to appear.

Yourcenar also presents the Roman Empire in terms of repetition in a large historical scale. As an institution, the Empire is not the absolute embodiment of

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<sup>17</sup> De Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', p. 207.

temporally fixed abstract values, but the differential representation of these values as they change over time. More specifically, for Yourcenar, Rome is a historical formation which draws its signification from a previous historical formation, namely, Greece. In the last chapter of my thesis, I shall discuss the way this complicates the concepts of accepting and reconstructing and makes it necessary to re-evaluate the notion of the authentic. In the present context, I wish to underline Rome's heteronomy, as it is understood in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*. Its signification as historical formation and political 'subject' lies in the fact that it re-iterates a representation which is prior to it, a sign which precedes it.

Arguably, then, Hadrien's authority to attribute political and cultural significations in a language that has lost its symbolic power relies on the allegorical (in de Man's sense) management of values. This is a way to understand Yourcenar's characterization of Hadrien as a 'manipulateur de génie'. He does not seek to discredit individual values and institutions, despite the loss of their legitimacy. If acceptance contains revolt and reconstructing contains constructing, then it is also true that allegory contains the symbol. This is not a fact the de Man emphasizes sufficiently. However, his argument entails the idea of the fall of symbolic representations, which means that allegory contains, albeit in inverted or demystified form, the metaphysics of identity in the symbol. In the following passage, de Man draws a fundamental distinction between symbol and allegory:

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. In so doing, it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognized as a non-self.<sup>18</sup>

De Man is keen to translate the rhetorical difference between symbol and allegory into the existential difference between illusory conceptualization and demystified recognition of the self. Hence, perhaps, his reluctance to discuss extensively the role

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<sup>18</sup> De Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', p. 207.

of the desire for unity during the production of allegorical meaning. Still, his analysis of allegory is clearly based on a negotiation between the positive act of creation and the negative work of repetition. By designating allegory as a movement of distancing and renunciation, he acknowledges indirectly that the fall of the symbols, and, consequently, the nostalgia for identity, are the conditions for the production of allegorical meaning. It follows that existential self-definition is the result of a repetitive process that begins with the desire for coincidence with the world and passes through the secular experience of frustration. Now, this is a process that Hadrien experiences frequently in *Mémoires*. On the basis of it, he pursues existential freedom by accepting, rather than revolting against, the mechanisms of representation that hinder the work of self-definition. In the previous chapter I stressed that the notion of *acceptation* is inherently paradoxical. This is evident in the present context, where the recognition and acceptance of symbolic values are the conditions for the advent of the negative moment of renunciation, and the establishment of the demystifying language of allegory. Yourcenar's paradoxical dialectic, according to which 'reconstruire' contains the illusion of the possibility of 'construire', coincides with the dialectic between allegory and symbol. It is through the blindness of accepting that Cavafy and Hadrien acquire the insight of authentic revolt.

A new definition of authenticity, beyond 'the nostalgia and the desire to coincide', arises from de Man's theory of allegory and irony. In the following paragraphs, I shall compare the metaphysical definitions of authenticity and purity with their ironic re-determination in de Man's and Yourcenar's texts. While de Man does not discuss the idea of authenticity in a straightforward manner, its importance for his thesis is demonstrated by the frequency with which he uses this word and its derivatives and synonyms. He writes that 'the prevalence of allegory [in early romantic literature] always corresponds to the unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny'. A few pages further down, he draws a similar conclusion with regard to irony: 'Both [allegory and irony] are determined by an authentic experience of

temporality'.<sup>19</sup> These arguments are based on de Man's remark that time is constitutive of allegory and irony, as opposed to 'the world of the symbol', where time is not 'the originary constitutive category'. In the symbol, temporality intervenes merely contingently, in a way that – one is tempted to say – does not harass the self-sufficient mechanism of the production of symbolic meaning. However, when temporality is introduced as a constitutive factor in the representation, then the symbol is destabilized and loses its autonomy. It becomes a sign among past and future signs. As de Man suggests: 'it is of the essence of the previous sign to be pure anteriority'. By being purely anterior, the sign itself loses its identity and ceases to exist purely as itself: the temporal sign becomes impure. To conclude, when the temporality of the representation is only contingent, then the sign is stable and pure; but when there is pure temporality, as in the cases of allegory and irony, the sign loses its purity.

Yourcenar referred to a similar paradox when she noted that the *Historia Augusta*, one of her historical sources for *Mémoires*, brings the contemporary reader into almost unmediated contact with the fleeting, unofficial 'jugements [du Romain] de la rue [...] sur l'histoire qui passe'. 'Nous avons ici', she added, 'l'opinion à l'état pur, c'est-à-dire impur'.<sup>20</sup> An analogous moment occurs in the last part of Yourcenar's autobiography, *Quoi? L'éternité*. She imagines her father talking to Egon, the real person on whom the main character of *Alexis* was modelled, on the subject of homosexuality: 'Et je ne te dirai pas non plus qu'il y a là je ne sais quelle voie rapide pour atteindre à la réalité charnelle *pure et simple, ou impure et simple*'.<sup>21</sup> These examples may not refer to temporality as such, but they describe states of facticity and fleetingness which cannot be idealized and conceptualized: the 'hearsay on the street', the instability of the flesh. As in the case of rhetorical figures, we are

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<sup>19</sup> De Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', pp. 206 and 226.

<sup>20</sup> Yourcenar, 'Les Visages de l'histoire dans l'« Histoire auguste »', in *EM*, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> *EM*, p. 1283, my emphasis. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Quoi ? L'éternité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988). *Quoi ? L'éternité* is the last part of Yourcenar's autobiographical trilogy *Le Labyrinthe du monde*.

dealing with two different forms of purity: the purity of the existential and the purity of the conceptual. The pure facticity of existence fouls, as it were, the concept of being. In Yourcenar's thought, purity and impurity interchange positions.

In de Man's essay, temporality is the element that contaminates conceptual thought with the result that concepts cease to be pure. This paradox affects the notion of authenticity as well. There are two contradictory definitions of authenticity, depending on whether time is seen as simultaneity or anteriority.

- In the domain of the symbol, authenticity designates a state of identity between essence and appearance, upon which the autonomy of the individual sign rests. From a theological point of view, the authenticity of the name is guaranteed by dogma, which decrees the *a priori* presence of God in his creations, and therefore the unity between the self and the 'non-self'. In this state of primordial authenticity – evidently a prelapsarian world – time is reduced to eternity, or, as de Man notes, to simultaneity and spatiality.

- In the domains of allegory and irony, this metaphysical interpretation of authenticity is profoundly challenged by the introduction – de Man writes: the discovery - of time in the process of representation.<sup>22</sup> Using persistently negative terms and expressions, de Man describes the temporalities that structure each of these rhetorical figures:

Allegory exists entirely within an ideal time that is never here and now, but always a past or an endless future.<sup>23</sup>

The act of irony [...] reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality. Irony divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed for ever by a relapse within the inauthentic.<sup>24</sup>

For the purposes of my analysis, these temporalities coincide and complicate the meaning of authenticity in the same way. What is considered to be authentic in a

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<sup>22</sup> De Man writes that 'allegory and irony are linked in their common discovery of a truly temporal predicament', de Man, p. 222.

<sup>23</sup> De Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', p. 226.

<sup>24</sup> De Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', p. 222.

constitutively temporal environment is essentially inauthentic from the point of view of the timeless tautological sign. The temporality of allegory and irony can be considered inauthentic, inasmuch as neither allows for the establishment of a present in which signifier and signified constitute an organic whole; yet the same temporality *is* authentic, since it allows time to appear not as static presence, but as dynamic absence in the sense of the past and the future. Similarly, in theological terms, allegorical and ironic time is inauthentic, for it does not emanate immediately from a divine authority; still, considering that the divine will has lost its effectiveness, this time *is* authentic, because in its context this loss is recognized and accepted.

Therefore any argument on authenticity depends on whether one perseveres in the faith in the metaphysical unity between surface and depth, or perceives a break ('distance and difference') at the heart of the semiotic representation. De Man, who certainly belongs to the second category, inverts the meaning of authenticity and uses it to qualify such concepts as temporality, experience and being, that no longer refer to a transcendental origin, but which describe the current secular state of affairs in terms of loss.<sup>25</sup> In the context of de Man's essay, to be authentic means to affirm the discontinuity or troubled continuity between being and the source of signification, and to accept that meaning dwells negatively in the language of irony.

It is worth adding that, according to Frank Lentricchia, de Man receives his concept of authenticity from Sartre. In his *After the New Criticism*, Lentricchia explains:

Sartre's attempt to evade his intellectual progenitor [i.e. Heidegger] lies in his insistence that what Heidegger thought primally integrated was, in actuality, primally divorced; hence the antithesis of the for-itself and the in-itself. In his revision of romantic poetic de Man follows Sartre.

And elsewhere in the same chapter he adds:

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<sup>25</sup> In 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', apart from the expressions 'authentically temporal', 'truly temporal' and 'authentic experience', for which references have already been given, de Man uses the expressions 'authentic being' (p. 216), 'actual self' (p. 219) and 'good poetic conscience' (p. 208).

From *Being and Nothingness* de Man picks up and accommodates to romantic literary contexts *pour soi* and *en soi*, the key terms of Sartre's phenomenological ontology, and the relations of these terms to both good and bad faith, authentic and inauthentic existence.<sup>26</sup>

Lentricchia is not entirely convincing in his evaluation of identity and difference in Heidegger. In Chapters 4 and 5, I shall be discussing the Heideggerian theme of unity that includes difference without cancelling it, and its relationship with Yourcenar's perception of order and disorder. Still, Lentricchia's comments are helpful in that they emphasize the irreducible gap that de Man perceives between the self and the world. Further, the connection which Lentricchia establishes between Sartre and de Man emphasizes the existential implications of de Man's analysis of the temporality of rhetoric.

Indeed, de Man pays particular attention to the existential implications of authenticity, especially in the framework of his discussion of the temporality of irony. Drawing principally from Baudelaire's idea of *le comique absolu* in his essay 'De l'essence du rire', de Man suggests that irony brings about 'the division of the subject into a multiple consciousness'.<sup>27</sup> In his essay, Baudelaire defines this subject as 'un philosophe, un homme qui ait acquis, par habitude, la force de se dédoubler rapidement et d'assister comme spectateur désintéressé aux phénomènes de son moi'.<sup>28</sup> This *dédoublement* is the beginning of a permanent split within the subject. After the fall into irony, illusory identification with nature gives way to the realization of the rhetorical constitution of the self. At the moment of irony, de Man writes, 'the innocence or authenticity of our sense of being in the world is put into question'.<sup>29</sup> De Man explains that inasmuch as ironic language places the subject at a distance from which it can reflect on itself, it transforms it into a sign. 'Language

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<sup>26</sup> Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 287 and 285.

<sup>27</sup> De Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', p. 213.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'De l'essence du rire', in *Curiosités esthétiques: L'art romantique et autres œuvres critiques*, ed. by H. Lemaître (Paris: Garnier, 1962), pp. 241-263, (p. 251), emphasis in the original.

<sup>29</sup> De Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', p. 215.

divides the subject into an empirical self, immersed in the world, and a self that becomes like a sign in its attempt at differentiation and self-definition.<sup>30</sup> This semiotic make-up of the subject has devastating effects on human existence. On the one hand, there is an inaccessible self which remains part of an undifferentiated empirical world. On the other hand, there is a phantasmatic, rhetorical self who can at best ruminate lucidly or mournfully upon this internal gap. In de Man's words, 'the ironic language splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity.'<sup>31</sup> The ironic fall of the philosopher-poet leads to the realization that what the self perceives as a natural or unselfconscious state of being is in fact an inauthentic one. After the fall into irony, which Baudelaire also associates with the separation between man and god, man exists in a consciously unnatural and permanently insecure state, in an unstable relationship with a world that no one masters.<sup>32</sup>

This is the same problematic that informs Yourcenar's major novels and her autobiographical trilogy. Despite their particularities, Alexis, Éric von Lhomond, Hadrien, Zénon, Nathanaël, as well as some of the central characters of *Le Labyrinthe du monde*, Yourcenar's autobiographical trilogy, share a common interest in locating authentic subjectivity beyond the level of socio-political, cultural or ideological identity, in a solitary, mysterious self that is negated by both the rhetorical I and the empirical world. Among Yourcenar's characters – fictional or otherwise – it is possible to distinguish those who are overwhelmed by this sad existential predicament (Léo Belmonte and Nathanaël in *Un homme obscur*, Octave in *Souvenirs pieux*); those who continue the effort towards self-determination by

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<sup>30</sup> De Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', p. 213.

<sup>31</sup> De Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', p. 214.

<sup>32</sup> In 'De l'essence du rire', Baudelaire describes the moment of irony in terms of fall: 'le spectacle d'un homme qui trébuche au bout du trottoir', (p. 248). He establishes a clear link between laughing and falling, in the theological sense of the word: 'Il est certain [...] que le rire humain est intimement lié à l'accident d'une chute ancienne, d'une dégradation physique et morale', (p. 245).



acknowledging, and investing in, the ironic split within the self (most notably Zénon, but also Alexis in *Alexis ou le traité du vain combat*, Éric in *Le Coup de grâce*, Michel in *Archives du nord*); and those who suffer the consequences of this split, but cannot help rationalizing and ideologizing it, with the result that they resort to political violence in the hope of reversing it (Marcella in *Denier du rêve*, Sophie in *Le Coup de grâce*, Rémy in *Souvenirs pieux*, but also Électre in Yourcenar's play *Électre ou la chute des masques*). Unsurprisingly, none of these characters achieve their objectives, unless of course we take their defeat – almost invariably sublimated into the desire for death, and typically underscored by its advent – as a proof of the authenticity of their attitude. The longed-for demise of these anti-heroes, brought about by abandonment to sorrow, ironic manipulation of fate or, *a fortiori*, ideologization and violence, signifies the recognition of the subject's original alienation from itself and corroborates its constitutive inability to establish its identity.

Notably, Hadrien is the only one among these characters who does not belong exclusively to any of these categories. He is certainly not a rebel, but his violent suppression of the revolt of the Jews testifies to gross ideological prejudice to which both he and – to some extent at least – Yourcenar are blind, as I will discuss subsequently. He is not wrecked by pessimism, but his initial hysteria at the idea of his imminent death contrasts unfavourably with the dignity with which Nathanaël, the main character of *Un homme obscur*, lets himself die in sadness. He is a great ironist in that he has no faith in the symbols that he institutes, but he is not marked by Zénon's fundamental atheism and, at a crucial turn of the plot, he sees himself as the god and creator *ex nihilo* of Antinoüs, his lover and 'perfect' work of art. Through his failures, which are largely due to the force and allure of the promise of identity, Hadrien appears as one of the most authentic of the novelistic characters that Yourcenar has proposed as figures of authenticity. In *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, the path towards recognition of the fragmented ontological status of the self does not involve

asceticism and does not finish with the implementation of Hadrien's technique of liberation through manipulation of ironic fate: it also entails falling into impurity. Hadrien looks at his fallen self and realizes that both his political and his existential projects are undermined by his repeated failure truly to anticipate the moment of irony. Yourcenar strongly suggests that he is saved – authenticated – by dint of being aware of his inauthenticity.

De Man understands the meaning and the necessity of individual falling in a different way:

The mere falling of others does not suffice; he [i.e. the language-determined man] has to go down himself. The ironic, twofold self that the writer or philosopher constitutes by his language seems able to come into being only at the expense of his empirical self, falling (or rising) from a stage of mystified adjustment into the knowledge of his mystification.<sup>33</sup>

Here is where de Man's and Yourcenar's perceptions of irony differ most strongly. De Man stresses that falling is by no means the preamble of a return to unity between the rhetorical self and the world. For him, irony and the consciousness of irony do not have any redemptive effect. He criticizes Starobinski for claiming that irony in Hoffmann's *Prinzessin Brambilla* is a means of 'reconciliation of the spirit and the world'.<sup>34</sup> De Man comments that 'true irony [states] the continued impossibility of reconciling the world of fiction with the actual world'.<sup>35</sup> In the same vein, he is sceptical of Peter Szondi's utopian projection of a new positivity that comes as a result of the negative knowledge of irony. According to Szondi, irony, or the conscious establishment of a distance between 'finite achievement' and 'infinite longing', allows for a 'prefiguration of a future unity'.<sup>36</sup> De Man considers this view

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<sup>33</sup> De Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', p. 214.

<sup>34</sup> Jean Starobinski, 'Ironie et mélancolie: Gozzi, Hoffmann, Kierkegaard', in *Estratto da Sensibilità e Razionalità nel Settecento* (Florence: Sansoni, 1967), p. 459, quoted in English by de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', p. 217.

<sup>35</sup> De Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', p. 218.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Szondi, 'Friedrich Schlegel und die Romantische Ironie', *Satz und Gegensatz: Sechs Essays* (Frankfurt: Insel-Verlag, 1964), pp 5-24, (p. 17); quoted in English by de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', p. 219.

as ‘wrong from the point of view of the ironist’, who is aware that conceptual manipulation of experience precludes any hope for reconciliation. In a remark that amounts to a critique of traditional Hegelianism, de Man adds: ‘The dialectic of self-destruction and self-invention which [...] characterizes the ironic mind is an endless process that leads to no synthesis.’<sup>37</sup> It follows that there is no possibility of permanent self-definition and, rather than synthesis and restoration, the best one can expect is a constantly renewed confirmation of one’s inauthenticity. But, as de Man puts it, ‘to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic’.<sup>38</sup>

In view of this argument, Yourcenar’s position with regard to Hadrien’s authenticity and the significance of individual falling has to be re-examined. It is important to know whether she is drawn into the epistemological error or even the state of existential bad faith for which de Man essentially reprimands Szondi and Starobinski. As I have suggested already, for Yourcenar, irony is not the catalyst for the dialectical development of the self. Nowhere in her work does it lead to a new synthesis of experience and the intellect. As regards the temporality of irony, we may safely assume that she would endorse de Man’s assertion that ‘irony is not temporary [...] but repetitive, the recurrence of a self-escalating act of consciousness’.<sup>39</sup> Otherwise, irony would be a mere intellectual stage in her narrative characters’ progress towards self-definition, followed by the invention of an authentic language that would be capable of articulating pragmatic expectations of redemption. But the closest these characters get to such a state of post-ironic bliss is the moment of their death, a moment shrouded in silence (Hadrien, Zénon, Belmonte, Nathanaël) and completely devoid of hope. In *Mémoires*, where the imminent death of the emperor constitutes an instance of irony which envelops the entire novel, the impossibility of establishing a sense of self-identity becomes more and more evident as he approaches

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<sup>37</sup> De Man, ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’, p. 220.

<sup>38</sup> De Man, ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’, p. 214.

<sup>39</sup> De Man, ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’, p. 220.

the end. A short phrase near the end of the book, when Hadrien is struggling with the idea of dying, echoes de Man's assertion that 'to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic'. Hadrien says, 'La méditation de la mort n'apprend pas à mourir', thus intimating that, till the very end, the knowledge of the ironic fall does not prepare one for the reality of falling.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the question arises as to how one is to understand Hadrien's authenticity. In what way can one be authentic, when, as both Yourcenar and de Man acknowledge, this would imply the impossible reconciliation between language and experience?

To understand the discrepancy between these two writers who, otherwise, start from similar assumptions and follow similar lines of thought, I propose to look further back at de Man's idea of the a-historicity of the subject. It is necessary to do so, since, unlike Yourcenar, de Man associates the nostalgia for authenticity with the arbitrary expectation of redemption through the consummation of history. He defies conventionally understood Hegelian historiography by suggesting that history does not unfold according to a plan of fulfilment, and that our knowledge of this fact does not compensate for the inconsequence of history. Inasmuch as we understand authenticity as the telos and the overcoming of history, the subject can never be authentic, because it is fundamentally incapable of being historical. This means that the subject and history are articulated along such an 'un-natural', a-historical and eccentric structure as language. Arguably, the central point made in 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' is that temporality in its subjective and historical dimensions is a rhetorical scheme, precisely because what is felt as time is nothing more than the experience of the repetition of a failure to signify. In the following passage from this essay, de Man stresses that a-historicity is the result of a shortcoming, a lack which is constitutive of the subject.

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<sup>40</sup> *OR*, p. 510.

It is a historical fact that irony becomes increasingly conscious of itself in the course of demonstrating the impossibility of our being historical. In speaking of irony we are dealing not with the history of an error but with a problem that exists within the self.<sup>41</sup>

At the heart of the matter lies de Man's conviction that history is not a serial, organic, or dialectical progress that intends a prescribed end. History 'is not natural', 'it is not phenomenal' and 'it is not really temporal', insists de Man in his essay on Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator', in an effort to challenge the organicist, the hermeneutical, but also the Marxist interpretations of history. In that essay, he famously refers to history as the 'errancy of language', a 'permanent disjunction', a 'linguistic complication'.<sup>42</sup> De Man is not claiming that history is an accident of immaterial consequence. His point is rather that the dominant historiographies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are characterized by a programmatic perception of history and fail to distinguish between the political and the apocalyptic. Thus, the romantic and more generally the modern subject continues to imagine itself as the agent of a history that contains its transcendence. De Man's thesis calls for a complete dissociation of the philosophy of history from theology and for a sustained discrimination between politics and the extra-linguistic or 'sacred' categories of totality and identity. In 'Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator"', Paul de Man cites approvingly Benjamin's thesis that the messianic dissolution of history cannot come from within history. Benjamin writes:

Only the messiah himself puts an end to history, in the sense that it frees, completely fulfils the relationship of history to the messianic. [...] Therefore the kingdom of God is not the telos of the dynamics of history, it cannot be posited as its aim; [...] seen historically it is not its aim, but its end, its termination.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> De Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', p. 211.

<sup>42</sup> All quotations from Paul de Man, 'Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator"', in *The Resistance to Theory*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 73-93, (p. 92).

<sup>43</sup> Quoted and translated by de Man in 'Conclusions', p. 93. An English translation of Benjamin's 'Theologico-Political Fragment' is in Peter Demetz (ed.), *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), pp. 312-313.

In Benjamin's comment de Man sees a confirmation of his claim that history cannot be properly historical, in the sense that it is not an intentional process and has no teleological design. The self, according to de Man, is a-historical, because it can never hope to coincide with nature: such a coincidence could never be the result of a historical process, but only of an extra-historical agency, that of God. If history is not possible, then there cannot be any politics either, at least not in the sense of a collective project which aims at creating a communal identity. On the contrary, politics as it is applied in a secular age can only be a form of poetics. Politics confirms, rather than challenges, the linguistic constitution of history, and does not contain the promise of authentication. De Man concludes this essay by arguing contra Gadamer that, properly speaking, there is no modernity, if modernity is understood as a dialectical achievement, 'an essentially theological notion'.<sup>44</sup> Critical negation and ironic distance, even if they are considered as particular features of modernity – a claim with which de Man disagrees anyway –, do not trigger off the political process of historical fulfilment and do not signal the end of the schism between empirical and linguistic self. Authenticity is not possible, de Man would claim, because the self is not 'designed' to be part of a historical plan of redemption.

The relationship between authenticity and modernity will be further discussed in the next chapter of my thesis. At this point, however, I would like to question de Man's claim that poetics and history have 'no room for certain historical notions such as the notion of modernity'.<sup>45</sup> With this statement, de Man equates the promise of authenticity with the putative dialectical accomplishment of the work of history in modernity. However, is the equation between modernity as a 'theological notion' and authenticity as exclusive and necessary as de Man suggests? Despite de Man's assertions, we have witnessed instances of authenticity – however ephemeral and isolated - in modern art and in political thought, as a reaction to the concept of the

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<sup>44</sup> De Man, 'Conclusions', p. 93.

<sup>45</sup> De Man, 'Conclusions', p. 93

unified self. Presumably, one of de Man's goals is to discredit such violent metaphysical visions of modernity as Nazism and Stalinism, where authenticity is measured in terms of the subject's adaptability to total and teleological perceptions of history. Nevertheless, de Man's unconditional identification of authenticity with totality does not do justice to those typically modern and essentially political approaches to representation where emphasis is laid on the impure and the profane. In terms of artistic modernism, it would be useful to mention here Peter Bürger's distinction between a 'work-centered modernism' which is characterized by a 'peculiar pathos of purity' (he names particularly 'functionalist architecture, abstract painting and the *nouveau roman*'), and the radical avant-garde (for example 'écriture automatique', 'Magritte's painting' and the Dadaists). According to Bürger, the avant-garde breaks the boundary with the external world 'through audacious borrowings and provocative vulgarizations'.<sup>46</sup> Given this distinction, it can be argued that the avant-garde paves the way for an understanding of selfhood and politics beyond the longing for identity, and therefore announces a new form of authenticity that is characteristically modern. Tellingly, in 'Conclusions', de Man quotes Benjamin's praise of Bloch's *The Spirit of Utopia* to support his argument.<sup>47</sup> By taking recourse to Benjamin and Bloch, he implicitly accepts that distinct configurations of modern political thought which take into account the linguistic constitution of subjectivity are possible. Thus we may legitimately understand modernity as the context in which no illusions about the limits of politics and representation can be sustained any longer. It is by no means self-evident that this approach to modernity will lead to the error of historical immanentism, for which de Man reproves Gadamer, but also, implicitly, Starobinski and Szondi.

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<sup>46</sup> Peter Bürger, 'The Disappearance of Meaning: Essay at a Postmodern Reading of Michel Tournier, Botho Strauss and Peter Handke', in Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman (eds), *Modernity and Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 94-111. See especially pp. 97-98.

<sup>47</sup> De Man, 'Conclusions', p. 93.

The similarities and differences between Yourcenar and de Man as regards the elusive path of authenticity and the dead end of irony can now be summarized. De Man's distinction between the actual and the fictional self helps us understand Yourcenar's emphasis on the split between the self and the world. Moreover, Yourcenar is aware, at least as much as de Man, of the fact that sophistication and the consciousness of irony do not suffice to reconcile the semiotically determined man with himself and realise the vision of transcendence. However, while these conclusions allow de Man to pronounce the end of the hope for authenticity, Yourcenar maintains that not everything is lost, because authenticity does not have to be understood in the strict sense of redemption and reconciliation through the fulfilment of history. Modernity reveals the aesthetic/poetic character of our relationship with nature, thus presenting us with a unique opportunity to claim a new form of authenticity. The theme of man's solitude in a secular era, which Yourcenar borrows from Flaubert, resonates again at this point. Free from the injunction to author his own history, man has the option to recognize himself negatively in the constancy of difference that is installed within the self. This negative recognition, which modernity makes possible, is what Yourcenar proposes to understand as a new form of purity and authenticity. As we have seen already, in Yourcenar's work, the constancy of difference manifests itself predominantly as the experience of time. One of the central theses of her *œuvre* is that time narrates man through the demise of his works, while man fails to narrate himself by means of poetic language (in de Man's sense). Nowhere is this thesis expressed more succinctly than in Yourcenar's short essay 'Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur'.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> 'Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur' is the title essay of Yourcenar's collection of essays *Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983); included in *EM*.



## Time and difference

One of the most striking characteristics of ‘Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur’ is the unapologetic fashion in which Yourcenar informs us that true authorship and the fulfilment of artistic intention reside in time, rather than in man. Time authenticates the works of art, by leaving the marks of wear and those of lived history on them. Yourcenar begins this essay with a simple statement: ‘Le jour où une statue est terminée, sa vie, en un sens, commence’.<sup>49</sup> This almost prosaic hypothesis, upon which Yourcenar intends to meditate rather than reason, challenges the conventional perception of the work of art as a static and finished representation. She goes on to explore various forms of change (‘modifications’) suffered by statues: some of these changes are due to natural wear, some have been occasioned by human violence and some are the effect of different trends in conservation and restoration. Her summary examination ends with an ironic remark. Yourcenar points out that the most striking transformations occur to statues lost in the sea. After centuries of ongoing ‘décomposition sans agonie’, ‘[ces statues] ne nous appartiennent plus’:

Elles ont subi un changement océanique, aussi riche qu'étrange. Le Neptune [...] destiné à orner le quai d'une petite ville [...] est descendu au royaume de Neptune. La Vénus céleste est devenue l'Aphrodite des mers.<sup>50</sup>

There is a twofold reconciliation at play here, but it is, in both cases, ironic. Firstly, there is an ironic reconciliation with the sacred. Neptune, the god of the sea, and Venus, who, as Aphroditē, was born from the foam of the sea, re-assume their original state, they finally return to the sea where they belong. However, this happens at the expense of their symbolic value. The union with the divine element is achieved precisely when god abandons man (‘ces statues ne nous appartiennent plus’).

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<sup>49</sup> *EM*, p. 312.

<sup>50</sup> *EM*, p. 316.

Secondly, there is an ironic reconciliation of the signified with the artistic signifier: these statues become authentic only after they escape the various historically specific processes of signification. Neptune returns to his 'kingdom', Venus becomes Aphroditē, when they are free from the intention of the artist-creator. These are extreme and controversial instances of reconciliation. They introduce, as I mentioned above, a new concept of authenticity, that has more to do with the perception of a world that fulfils itself through the temporal process of waste, than with man's potential for authorship and creativity.

In 'Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur' Yourcenar remains descriptive and suggestive rather than overtly argumentative. Nonetheless, her contemplative, self-assured style is at odds with the violent theme of the essay, namely, destruction and waste in and of art. The suspicion that Yourcenar is pushing forward a specific theoretical agenda becomes stronger when we take into account the timing of the essay, originally drafted in 1954, a few years after the Second World War. Indeed, the essay's full power and meaning emerges when it is read under the light of a specifically modern and politically urgent discussion of representation. Rather than a random collection of images and thoughts relating to the bizarre effect of the passage of time on sculpture, 'Le Temps' is an essay on violence in aesthetics, and on the aesthetics of violence in history. It is based on the assumption that the work of man (art, war, destruction and restoration) is animated by the ambition to refer to some original ideal. As far as this ambition is concerned, Yourcenar does not discriminate between the artist, whose work is supposed to represent truth, the rebel, who decapitates statues of false idols, and the restorer, who re-assembles fragments of ancient marble according to the prevailing taste of his or her time. These three categories of artistic agency are united in the common goal to reclaim a state of lost authenticity in the conventional sense of the word, by forcing a static correspondence between the work of art and what it is supposed to represent. While Yourcenar accepts that the aspiration for authenticity is legitimate and indeed proper to man, she shows that the

methods used to fulfil it, creation and destruction, are fruitless and wrong. They are based – and it is here that Paul de Man's analysis is most useful – on the misleading idea that progress in knowledge and the subversion of aesthetic, political or religious traditions can lead to the recovery of truth. Creation and destruction rely on the hypothesis that the creative subject is the author of history and that this history will eventually come to its fulfilment. Simply by pointing to the ruined statues of the past, Yourcenar leads us to a similar conclusion to that which de Man would also draw a few years later: namely, that the ironic effect of time is a sign of the impossibility of self-identity.

However, despite de Man's reservations, in Yourcenar's case, the knowledge of irony does not bring about the renewal of the aspiration to authenticity in its metaphysical guise. Nothing in 'Le Temps' indicates that manipulation of ironic time may yield better results than the centuries-long fight against it. On the contrary, she considers violence and the desire for identity in art as constitutive elements of life and nature – elements which are as indisputable as the natural forces that transform slowly the statues of ancient divinities. For Yourcenar, the metaphysics of the symbol, ineffective as it is *per se*, remains deeply engraved in the human psyche. If her essay belongs to a new era, it is because she decides to search for beauty and truth not in the symbol and its subversion, but in the symbol's ironic fall over a long period of time. From the statues' exposure to the hazards of nature and history, a higher form of beauty is begotten that incorporates ambition and frustration:

À la beauté telle que l'a voulue un cerveau humain, une époque, une forme particulière de société, [les modifications des statues] ajoutent une beauté involontaire, associée aux hasards de l'histoire, due aux effets des causes naturelles et du temps. Statues si bien brisées que de ce débris naît une œuvre nouvelle, parfaite par sa segmentation même.<sup>51</sup>

In this passage, the criterion of perfection follows the same rules as the criterion of authenticity in the two essays of de Man that I discussed above: what is considered as

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<sup>51</sup> *EM*, p. 313.

perfect from the point of view of ironic time is considered as imperfect from the point of view of the artist and vice versa. Ultimately, the work of art is authenticated by '[sa] décomposition sans agonie, [sa] perte sans mort, [sa] survie sans resurrection'<sup>52</sup>. This amounts to saying that the bridging of the gap between intention and meaning, between the empirical and the linguistic self, is not conditional upon death and resurrection, over which the artist, the a-historical subject, has no power. The hope for the messianic solution, which gives rise to the aesthetics of the symbol, is but a necessary first step. The passage of time transforms works of art into authentic representations. The observer of ruins may then realise that there is no need to persist in this initial desire for identity as a coincidence between artistic intention and the work of art.

In 'Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur', as in *Mémoires*, the *reconstructeur* can estimate better than the artist the significance of the transformations suffered by ancient statues. Yourcenar writes that their fragmented members convey better than the original work of art such notions as grace, love, movement and the awe of death, and that some of these statues are so ruined that they are indiscernible from pebbles found in the seashores of the Aegean Sea. She then continues as follows:

L'expert pourtant n'hésite pas : cette ligne effacée, cette courbe ici perdue et là retrouvée ne peut provenir que d'une main humaine, et d'une main grecque, ayant travaillé en tel endroit au cours de tel siècle. Tout l'homme est là, sa collaboration intelligente avec l'univers, sa lutte contre lui, et cette défaite finale où l'esprit et la matière qui lui sert de support périssent à peu près ensemble. Son intention s'affirme jusqu'au bout dans la ruine des choses.<sup>53</sup>

This passage encapsulates Yourcenar's theory of authentic representation. Unlike de Man, but also unlike the structuralists who associate the dead end of representation with the death of meaning, she sees the failure of western aesthetics as the triumph of artistic intention. To be sure, she does not argue for the rehabilitation of the author. She rather points out that authorial intention is ultimately fulfilled *in spite of* the

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<sup>52</sup> *EM*, p. 316.

<sup>53</sup> *EM*, p. 313.

author. This sounds like a paradox; but, in 'Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur', Yourcenar shows that the identification of intention and meaning is achieved ('s'affirme') in ways that the artist could never imagine. It follows that, in principle, artistic intention is not wholly present in the artist's consciousness. The western artist entertains an immodest concept of authenticity. He attempts to materialize this concept by mastering both matter and spirit, an act which is little short of *hybris*. As de Man shows, not even the Baudelairean 'philosophe', for all his awareness of irony, can escape mystification, the illusion that the empirical self and the semiotic self are unified in the artefact. However, once the work of art is delivered over to nature and history, the artist's conscious intention fades away. As Yourcenar suggests, an old work of art no longer belongs to man. Fragmented, unrecognizable, it serves the overall intention of the act of representing, which is to state the true differential relationship between man and nature, between the concept and the thing, between language and experience.

These ideas have been present in less refined form in earlier works by Yourcenar. 'Sixtine', a series of short imagined monologues spoken by Michelangelo and other people related to him, written in 1931, is a prime example. In the following passage, the 'Master' meditates about nature, the limits of creativity and the inevitable perishing of the work of art. Time is described as 'l'éternelle mobilité de l'univers':

Vouloir immobiliser la vie, c'est la damnation du sculpteur. C'est en quoi, peut-être, toute mon œuvre est contre nature. Le marbre, où nous croyons fixer une forme de la vie périssable, reprend à tout instant sa place dans la nature, par l'érosion, la patine, et les jeux de la lumière et de l'ombre sur des plans qui se crurent abstraits, mais ne sont cependant que la surface d'une pierre. Ainsi, l'éternelle mobilité de l'univers fait sans doute l'étonnement du Créateur.<sup>54</sup>

It is worth noticing that 'Créateur' stands for the artist as much as for God: they both witness the instance of irony. Time is the great sculptor, for it hands back to nature

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<sup>54</sup> *EM*, p. 286; 'Sixtine' belongs to Yourcenar's collection of essays *Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur*.

and to history what is due to them, and thus restores an original state of affairs that involves no salvation. The demise and belated authentication of art – and, by extension, of all human constructions exposed to time – corroborate the primordial difference that exists between man and nature. However, in so far as Yourcenar sees beauty in ruins in an affirmative, rather than a romantic way, she points to a new aesthetics, based on a modest perception of authenticity. When, in the sight of a fragment, Yourcenar exclaims ‘Tout l’homme est là’, she intimates her conviction that man is there identical to himself: an entity split between materiality and ideality, yet an inextricable part of nature and history. This is not an achievement on man’s part, for he never consciously intends his works to end in ruins. Nevertheless, this is the ‘beautiful’ conclusion of his efforts, a disillusionment that serves as an answer to the question of referentiality. Yourcenar suggests simultaneously that authentic representation is beyond man’s possibilities *and* that it is always already an accomplished fact. For all his inauthenticity, man is fundamentally authentic, in that he exists temporally.

A few years after the publication of ‘Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur’, Yourcenar returned, with a twist, to the theme of the slow disintegration and re-authentication of the work of art. In ‘Le Cerveau noir de Piranèse’, a long essay written between 1959 and 1961, she wrote about the characteristically modern attitude of Piranesi who took ancient ruins as his artistic subject matter and, not unlike Yourcenar, offered a representation (his etchings) of the failures of representation (the ruins). Piranesi acts as a ‘reconstructeur’, whose task is to remind us of the pragmatic (that is, non-essential, non-metaphysical) character of things, disclosed to us in and by time. Yourcenar writes:

l’image de la ruine ne déclenche pas chez Piranèse une amplification sur la grandeur et la décadence des empires et l’instabilité des affaires humaines, mais une méditation sur la durée des choses ou leur lente usure, sur l’opaque identité du bloc continuant à l’intérieur du monument sa longue existence de pierre.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *EM*, p. 84.

It is worth noting Yourcenar's insistence that the work of art has no symbolic power: there is no 'amplification', no analogical or anagogical relationship between the monument depicted and what it was supposed to stand for, or between Piranesi's engravings and any abstract ideas. Instead, there is the affirmation of the self-identity of matter. Yourcenar goes on to re-instate the relationship between the linguistically determined self (artistic intention, 'volonté') and nature ('la pierre'), by introducing the parameter of time: 'L'édifice se suffit ; il est à la fois le drame et le décor du drame, le lieu d'un dialogue entre la volonté humaine encore inscrite dans ces maçonneries énormes, l'inerte énergie minérale, et l'irrévocable Temps'.<sup>56</sup> As in 'Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur', the intention of the artist (in this case the Roman architect whose construction Piranesi depicts) is affirmed in the temporal process of the undoing of the artefact. It is only during and because of this process that the work of art, as the negative representation of what the artist wishes to repress (disintegration in time), becomes authentic, that is, identical to itself. As Yourcenar puts it: '*L'édifice se suffit*'.

The ideas which I propose to read in these essays relate closely to the familiar theme of 'acceptation'. In 'Le Temps', Yourcenar invites indirectly the reader to acknowledge that there is no need to take resort to the hope of return to a state of authentic union with nature or the divine element. The failure of the symbol to advance history towards a putative messianic solution confirms man's inability to manipulate his destiny, let alone prepare himself for redemption. The examples of wrecked statues that Yourcenar offers in 'Le Temps', stretching from classical antiquity to the modern times, indicate that she perceives western aesthetics as a long epic battle, a revolt against temporality. This battle culminates in, and concludes historically with, the Second World War – a focal point of reference for Yourcenar's aesthetics and politics, as I will discuss in the last chapter of my thesis. For her, the

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<sup>56</sup> *EM*, pp. 84-85.

early post-war period, when both *Mémoires* and 'Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur' were written, is the time when man has finally the chance to develop a different aesthetics that involves seeing, rather than conceptualizing, and accepting, rather than revolting: *seeing* the ironic effects of time on human constructions and developing a form of realism that is free from the pretension of totality in the aesthetic representation; *accepting* that authenticity neither precedes nor follows the difference between the 'natural' and the 'linguistic' self, but designates the state of temporality and non-identity in which man finds himself historically. The possibility of an aesthetics of accepting, as Yourcenar figures it, is meant as a chance for man to reclaim his position in nature and in history - not as *auteur*, but as *collaborateur* and *reconstructeur*.

The possibility of accepting constitutes the basic difference between Yourcenar's theory of representation and de Man's poststructuralism. These two thinkers follow similar tracks in their analyses of the metaphysics of the symbol and its existential import on the fragmented subject. Neither of them considers that the knowledge of irony is the catalyst for re-directing history to its 'telos', as it were. They also agree that history as a political/poetical process has nothing to do with the projected union with the sacred, which is why man is doomed to exist in permanent inauthenticity. However, while Yourcenar moves on from this point to discover a new form of authenticity that does not reconstitute man to his former authority, de Man stops short of exploring an alternative place for man in the world. While 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' focuses on man's ironic fall and destitution, one might still detect a reverse anthropocentrism in this essay. De Man is content with inventing an aporetic, yet intensely dramatic world which revolves around the gap that was left by the fallen subject. However chaotic, this world still draws its metaphysical signification from man, who lies shattered in a conscious state of a-historicity. To a certain extent, these exclusively negative valorisations intimate de Man's reluctance to free himself from the conceptual framework of the quest for authenticity. One suspects de Man for



being too negative, in that he takes the absence of content in history as a proof of the a-historicity of the self.

This hard-line approach contrasts with Yourcenar's more pragmatic spirit. Although both writers agree that we should dismiss the idea that we partake in a historical process, Yourcenar's thought and writing are motivated by the *experience* of being historical. For her, the adventure of metaphysics, in which western man has found himself entangled, does not change the reality that we live in history. The conclusion that historical necessity does not possess a form conceivable by man (history is not organic, it is not dialectical, and so on) does not discredit the experience of this necessity. Thus it is not surprising that Yourcenar's understanding of historicity, as inferred from her literature, is akin to that of the post-Marxist critic Fredric Jameson, who writes in *The Political Unconscious* that '[o]ne does not have to argue the reality of history: necessity, like Dr. Johnson's stone, does that for us'.<sup>57</sup> He defines history as 'the experience of Necessity' and explains:

Necessity is not [...] a type of content, but rather the inexorable form of events; it is therefore [...] a retextualisation of history which does not propose the latter as some new representation or 'vision', some new content, but as the formal effects of what Althusser, following Spinoza, calls an 'absent cause'. History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its 'ruses' turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention.<sup>58</sup>

To be sure, the comparison between Yourcenar, the 'liberal' realist, and Jameson, the critic of the revisionist left, should not be taken too far, lest we lose from view the difference in their respective intellectual origins, vocabularies and goals. I am quoting Fredric Jameson as an example of a writer who wishes to distance himself from both the textualizing and the totalizing versions of historiography, by which I mean the structuralist interpretation of history as a self-reflective narrative and certain Marxist analyses which are heavily based on historical determinism. Like Yourcenar, he is aware of the ideological parameters involved in such conceptual

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<sup>57</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 82.

<sup>58</sup> Jameson, p. 102.

representations of reality, and reminds us that history is something to be endured, rather than comprehended. The subject is historically situated, because it is always a human being experiencing history, regardless of her (in)ability to articulate its content and to recognize herself in it. De Man is certainly right to criticize traditional Marxist and theological accounts which claim that history is a process culminating in the consummation of human praxis or divine will. However, the conclusion that humans are hostages of their representations is only half of the story. This awareness can help us re-organise our relationship with reality, seen as a newly identified elusive referent.

In so far as there is an analogy between Jameson's and Yourcenar's respective understandings of history, there is also a parallel between their ideas on artistic intention. As I discussed above, Yourcenar suggests that the intention of the artist does not find its fulfilment in the autonomous work of art, but, paradoxically, in the process of waste to which it is exposed. The reconciliation intended by the artist between nature and the semiotically structured self is achieved only through the destructive agency of time. While, strictly speaking, no one really 'intends' the destruction of the work of art, when it loses its symbolic value it slowly recovers its 'authentic temporality'. It is then a realistic depiction of the truth that the artist intends to convey; an authentic representation that does not involve the moment of transcendence of the self. Now, from a certain point of view, what Yourcenar contends with regard to artistic intention, Jameson also implies with regard to historical agency. Indeed, in the above passage Jameson argues that history affects us by ironically reversing the overt intentions of individual and collective action. However, this reversal does not possess a coherent meaning in itself. The 'ruses' of history are not part of an underlying narrative (*à la* Hegel), and the undoing of human labour is an unmediated process on which man has no authority. It is during and because of these reversals that the historicity of human action becomes manifest. Our failure to act as agents of history discloses the latter as something that we necessarily

experience but can never appropriate. A further thesis is now possible. If the 'true' face of history is revealed to us through the reversal of our intentions, then we depend on this repetitive process of mystification and disillusionment, desire and frustration, oblivion and memory, to become aware of our historicity. Unlike Yourcenar, Jameson does not take this argument so far as to suggest that the intention of the acting subject is affirmed '*dans la ruine des choses*'. Nonetheless, he performs a similar technique of inversion of significations. He condemns the conventional perception of history as the product of inauthentic historical conscience; conversely, he perceives, and affirms, history as the effect of an enigmatic and unrepresentable force, which has been traditionally assigned to the domain of the unreal. If, for Marguerite Yourcenar, authenticity is identified as the state of impurity in which we always already dwell, for Jameson, historicity is affirmed through recourse to a state of un-reality that penetrates and determines our actions.

So far in my thesis, I have tried to articulate in critical terms Yourcenar's perception of the stakes involved in the modern crisis of representation. Her preoccupation with questions of authenticity both in life and in art is not of epistemological - and even less of ethical - order; it rather has to do with the need to understand the self from an existential perspective, in a way that takes into account the aesthetic and semiotic constitution of subjectivity. To this effect, Yourcenar proposes - at least after the Second World War - to employ a technique of observing and accepting reality in its phenomenological aspect, which is that of disorder and difference. She further proposes to redefine existential identity in terms of the constancy of this difference, and to rethink politics according to the aesthetic principle of reconstructing rather than that of creating. These ideas permeate the thoughts and actions of her principal narrative characters and are further analysed in Yourcenar's critical writings. At the level of narrative representation, these ideas are also illustrated by the choice of historical fiction and that of realism as the main genre and the main narrative style of her novels.

Reading *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, I have come close to identifying political man as a post-humanist who no longer intends to act as the agent of history, but assumes the role of the guardian of cultural achievement and that of the manipulator of symbols and meanings. He is described as a 'reconstructeur', rather than a creator *ex nihilo*, and his task is to maintain and record the difference between conceptuality and experience, measurability and fluidity, and ultimately representability and what lies beyond it. Although *Mémoires* remains the principal reference when it comes to locating the instance of the political in the work of Marguerite Yourcenar, the rest of her fiction is rich in characters who function as pragmatists and mediators between such oppositions, without intending to reconcile them. One thinks especially of the figure of the *médecin*, a mediator between the body and the intellect, which, though important as a metaphor in *Mémoires*, constitutes one of the central devices of *L'Œuvre au noir*. I shall finish this chapter with a reference to the idea of medicine in these two novels and I shall discuss briefly its political and existential implications.

## Medicine and madness

Zénon, the principal character of *L'Œuvre au noir*, is a 16<sup>th</sup>-Century physician, philosopher and alchemist, entirely dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, at the expense of his freedom and, finally, his life. As his three qualities suggest, knowledge is equally understood in this novel in terms of concrete science, abstract thinking and magic. Each of these elements contributes to the definition of a philosophical and aesthetic realism which is even more rigorous than that of *Mémoires*. As a philosopher and an alchemist, Zénon realizes that truth as such is not available directly to the intellect, but must be understood non-rationally and non-speculatively. In one of the key moments in the novel, where he is asked whether he finds taking care of patients tiring, he answers:

Chaque nuit passée au chevet d'un quidam malade me replaçait en face de questions laissées sans réponse : la douleur et ses fins, la bénignité de la nature ou son indifférence, et si l'âme survit au naufrage du corps. Les explications analogiques qui m'avaient jadis paru élucider les secrets de l'univers me semblaient pulluler à leur tour de nouvelles possibilités d'erreur en ce qu'elles tendent à prêter à cette obscure Nature ce plan préétabli que d'autres prêtent à Dieu. Je ne dis pas que je doutais : douter c'est différent ; je poursuivais l'investigation jusqu'au point où chaque notion ployait dans mes mains comme un ressort qu'on fausse ; dès que je grimpais à l'échelle d'une hypothèse, je sentais se casser sous mon poids l'indispensable *si*...<sup>59</sup>

Unlike Hadrien, Zénon does not fall into irony in a dramatic manner. His repetitive fall from the 'ladder' ('l'échelle') refers to his scholarly investigations, rather to accidents of his life.<sup>60</sup> However, the result is the same. In the error of 'les explications analogiques' - which Paul de Man associates with the metaphysical logic of the symbol, as we saw above - Zénon sees a confirmation of the fact that man is not part of a preestablished natural or divine plan. Nonetheless, defying de Man's logic, Zénon does not conclude that the self is essentially un-natural, just because it does not knowingly partake in any natural project of redemption. As a physician, Zénon is well-placed to know the inexorable corporeality of the self, even at the moment of fall, where nature seems 'obscure', and the split between the self and the world seems most assured. The meaning of medicine in *L'Œuvre au noir* is that it offers a vantage point from which neither the inscrutability of nature nor the facticity of the subject can be mistaken.

In Michel Breulet's words: 'Parce qu'ils sont indissociables, Zénon passe ainsi de l'anxiété métaphysique à l'angoisse du corps'.<sup>61</sup> The body, which triggers Zénon's metaphysical anxiety and gives rise to questions about the intentionality of nature, is also the object on which he implements his medical technique. This technique is part of his attempt to approach truth scientifically, by measuring the distance that

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<sup>59</sup> OR, p. 646; Marguerite Yourcenar, *L'Œuvre au noir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Marguerite Yourcenar in *Les Yeux ouverts*: 'Il y a des chutes verticales dans la vie d'Hadrien. Il n'y en a pas chez Zénon ; on le sent indestructible', p. 190.

<sup>61</sup> Michel Breulet and M. Delcroix, 'La figure du médecin dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar', in *Bulletin de la Société Internationale d'Études Yourcenariennes*, No 21 (décembre 2000), (Tours: SIEY, 2000), pp. 161-82, (p. 180). This essay consists of two distinct parts each of which is written by one of the two authors.

separates him from it, just as Dürer measures the distance that separates him from the source of *his* anxiety, as we saw in the previous chapter. In the following passage, Zénon describes the relationship between the inquiring self and the world, and stresses the abilities and the failures of the ‘human spirit’:

J’en sais les limites [i.e. de l’esprit], et que le temps lui manquera pour aller plus loin, et la force, si par hasard lui était accordé le temps. Mais il est, et, en ce moment, il est Celui qui Est. Je sais qu’il se trompe, erre, interprète souvent à tort les leçons que lui dispense le monde, mais je sais aussi qu’il a en lui de quoi connaître et parfois rectifier ses propres erreurs. [...] J’ai observé les astres et examiné l’intérieur des corps. [...] Je sais que je ne sais pas ce que je ne sais pas ; j’envie ceux qui sauront davantage, mais je sais qu’ils auront tout comme moi à mesurer, peser, déduire et se méfier des déductions produites.<sup>62</sup>

What may sound like Zénon’s positivist attitude towards knowledge is in reality an expression of his modesty with regard to the limits of scientific mind. As a humanist, Zénon is confident in the power of the human mind and in future progress; at the same moment, however, he knows that a great deal of error is always mixed in scientific truth, and that the latter deals only with the accessible, the representable part of a greater truth which remains elusive. As he remarks a few lines further down: ‘Je me suis gardé de faire de la vérité une idole, préférant lui laisser son nom plus humble d’exactitude’.<sup>63</sup> This line sums up marvellously the negative humanism of *L’Œuvre au noir*, as well as Yourcenar’s appreciation of realism as the negative representation of truth. Zénon’s reluctance to idolize truth mirrors Yourcenar’s refusal to ideologize those aspects of reality which do not lend themselves to semiotic interpretation. Further, Zénon’s almost obsessive interest in scientific accuracy is due to his decision to remain within the limits of representation and apply its rules rigorously. Like the realist writer, Zénon is above all an artisan. This is most evident when we think that medicine is for him a technique for bringing the self to the outer limits of the unreal and the unrepresentable, without ever transcending them. Writing about Zénon as a physician, Michel Breulet made a similar point:

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<sup>62</sup> *OR*, p. 653.

<sup>63</sup> *OR*, p. 654.

S'abîmant en son corps, Zénon résorbe ainsi l'abîme où l'angoisse le précipite ; être en corps, c'est encore être ; c'est s'inscrire dans l'espace et la durée. Donc l'homme est à la fois machine et machiniste. Voilà, sans doute, comment, chez Zénon, se révèle la vocation médicale. Il s'agit pour lui de découvrir le machinisme du vivant, afin de le maîtriser. Passionnément, mais sans apparente passion, son désir est bien de pouvoir enfin conduire la machine, la faire ralentir ou accélérer, jusqu'à l'ultime immobilité.<sup>64</sup>

Breulet, who comes from the area of neuroscience rather than that of literature, stresses the reflexivity of the experience of being a medical doctor. Zénon studies his own body, and verifies its facticity, its 'being-there' spatially and temporally: 'être en corps, c'est encore être'. From this point of view, the body can be thought of as a machine, and the physician as a machinist, someone who employs a *technique*. Clearly, neither Yourcenar nor Breulet argue that the body is a machine before anything else. But in so far as it exists factically, the body is measurable. In this sense, the physician is an artisan whose task is to master a technique, as the above passage also confirms. The knowledge that comes from measuring the body allows the physician to manipulate it 'jusqu'à l'ultime immobilité', which in *L'Œuvre au noir* has the concrete meaning of Zénon's suicide. In the context of the problematic of representation, Zénon's suicide thus marks the end of measuring and the borderline between the sensible and what lies beyond it. By the same token, Zénon's suicide marks the end of realism. This point is made with dry precision in the final phrase of the novel, where Zénon lies dying in his prison cell, losing his senses one by one. Yourcenar then concludes by writing, 'Et c'est aussi loin qu'on peut aller dans la fin de Zénon.'<sup>65</sup> Just like medicine, writing explores the limits of the representable but refuses to go any further.

In a sense, what Zénon does in relation to the human body Hadrien does in relationship to the empire. To be sure, Hadrien's method is not scientific, but his decision to remain within the representational context and to work on a technique rather than a philosophy is based on the same principles as those of medicine.

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<sup>64</sup> Breulet, p. 181.

<sup>65</sup> *OR*, p. 833.

Hadrien reserves the highest praise for the Athenian physician Léothicyde, who is described in the novel as an ‘homme universel’: ‘Esprit sec, il m’a appris à préférer les choses aux mots, à me méfier des formules, à observer plutôt qu’à juger. Ce Grec amer m’a enseigné la méthode.’<sup>66</sup> It is therefore in medicine, and specifically through this Greek physician, who is described by Maurice Delcroix as ‘un Zénon avant la lettre’, that Hadrien first identified some of the basic notions which he then used in politics.<sup>67</sup> As in *L’Œuvre au noir*, these notions include the facticity of things (‘les choses’), as an expansion of the medical idea of the facticity of the body; the relativity of words and abstractions (‘les mots’, ‘les formules’); and finally the notion of the method which, in so far as it is opposed to the concepts of interpretation and judgement (‘juger’), is a synonym for ‘technique’. The relationship between medicine and politics is openly recognized by Hadrien:

La profession de médecin m’aurait plu : son esprit ne diffère pas essentiellement de celui dans lequel j’ai essayé de prendre mon métier d’empereur. Je me passionnai pour cette science trop proche de nous pour n’être pas incertaine, sujette à l’engouement et à l’erreur, mais rectifiée sans cesse par le contact de l’immédiat et du nu.<sup>68</sup>

Metaphorically speaking, in *Mémoires d’Hadrien*, politics is understood as a form of medicine applied to each subject and to the empire as a whole. Like medicine, politics is neither pure science nor an expression of pure creativity, but a negotiation, without reconciliation, between man and nature. Both disciplines are therapeutic, as it were, because, unlike other forms of representation, they only operate within concrete spatio-temporal contexts. The political leader plays a rectifying role, because he understands the difference between facticity and representation. He can recognize the impulse and the error of representation (‘l’engouement et l’erreur’), although he cannot prevent errors from occurring. He becomes an arch-ironist and, to that extent, he also becomes a therapist.

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<sup>66</sup> *OR*, p. 313.

<sup>67</sup> Breulet, p. 168.

<sup>68</sup> *OR*, p. 313.



As we saw, in 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', Paul de Man is sceptical of the idea of the therapeutic agency of irony. Still, before he rejects this idea, he discusses it in a way which is relevant to my present argument. With reference to Baudelaire's essay 'De l'essence du rire', he establishes a relationship between irony and madness, and more specifically between laughing at one's fall and being possessed by a 'folie lucide' after falling. He quotes Baudelaire's statement, 'Le rire est généralement l'apanage des fous', and explains that 'irony is unrelieved *vertige*, dizziness to the point of madness'.<sup>69</sup> Irony is madness because it originates in the internalized schism between the self and its representation. The dizziness of irony seizes everyone: 'Qu'est-ce que le vertige ? C'est le comique absolu ; il s'est emparé de chaque être', writes Baudelaire.<sup>70</sup> We may therefore argue, with Paul de Man, that madness is a constitutive characteristic of the self, in so far as the latter possesses (or is possessed by) a language. In this scheme of things, the arch-ironist can play the role of the therapist. Baudelaire wonders whether Hoffmann, whom he sees as a master of the 'comique absolu' and an arch-ironist, is indeed a 'médecin de fous':

C'est à croire qu'on a affaire à un physiologiste ou à un médecin de fous des plus profonds, et qui s'amuserait à revêtir cette profonde science de formes poétiques, comme un savant qui parlerait par apologues et paraboles.<sup>71</sup>

The ironist invests the 'profonde science' of medicine with 'formes poétiques'. This means that he cures madness with language; he does not simply explain what is wrong with representation, but uses 'apologues et paraboles', narration and fabulation, to demonstrate the difference that is installed within the subject. Consequently, irony is no cure in the sense of the re-authentication of the subject and the restoration of lost identity, as de Man surmises. Rather, the ironic tale could function as a repetitive confirmation of difference, a poetic and constantly deferred

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<sup>69</sup> De Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', p. 214 and 215. The quotation from Baudelaire is from 'De l'essence du rire', p. 245.

<sup>70</sup> Baudelaire, p. 260.

<sup>71</sup> Baudelaire, p. 261. This phrase is also partly quoted in de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', p. 216.

exposition of what Baudelaire and de Man call the ‘dédoublement’ of the self. By the same token, politics, itself a form of poetics, could also be a form of therapy.

Hadrien’s politics of ‘reconstruction’ is analogous to the ironic tale which reproduces the difference that causes madness. A political leader and ironist *par excellence*, Hadrien is a ‘médecin de fous’. In *Mémoires*, he is indeed presented as the *empereur-médecin* who implements a politics of difference to cure a ‘mad’ population and a ‘mad’ empire. We saw how, in the last passage from *Mémoires* quoted above, Hadrien pointed out the broad analogies between his ‘métier’ and that of the physician. With reference to his extensive tours in the empire, he remarks: ‘je pensais au médecin ambulant guérissant les gens de porte en porte’.<sup>72</sup> We are invited to think of the empire as a suffering subject with Hadrien as the emperor-healer.

As we saw, de Man stresses that irony can be considered as a ‘folie lucide’. On at least two occasions, Yourcenar uses similar expressions to describe Hadrien’s mental state. She describes Hadrien’s experience of a quasi-mystical night which he spent alone in the desert as an ‘extase lucide’.<sup>73</sup> Further down, she writes that, after Antinoüs’s death, Hadrien designed and founded a new city, Antinopolis, ‘soutenu d’une ivresse lucide’.<sup>74</sup> At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted Wyss’s comment that ‘la lucidité d’Hadrien est une lucidité d’accueil’. We now see that Hadrien’s lucidity consists in his extremely sharp sense of irony, his understanding of the error and inevitability of representations, and the paradoxical possibilities of authenticity and freedom that are thus offered to man. Hadrien explains this almost unique lucidity among his contemporaries as follows: ‘Il n’y a qu’un seul point sur lequel je me sens supérieur au commun des hommes : je suis tout ensemble plus libre et plus soumis qu’ils n’osent l’être. Presque tous méconnaissent également leur juste liberté et leur vraie servitude.’<sup>75</sup> Hadrien is presented as one of the few people of his time

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<sup>72</sup> OR, p. 382.

<sup>73</sup> OR, p. 402. I shall return to this point in Chapter 4.

<sup>74</sup> OR, p. 441.

<sup>75</sup> OR, pp. 317-18.

who did not misconstrue ('méconnaître') the meaning of freedom and submission. As *empereur-médecin*, he rectifies the erroneous perception of freedom as freedom from inauthenticity, and offers his subjects a new understanding of authenticity as the knowing acceptance of difference.

As I stressed earlier, the conclusions that I am exposing here remain provisional until Hadrien's political vision is examined in more detail in the last chapter of my thesis. Paul de Man's caution that 'to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic' will prove to be useful in that context. However, I feel that the theoretical possibilities opened up by Yourcenar's re-examination of such ideas as purity, acceptance and freedom remain largely valid, whatever the way they are implemented in *Mémoires d'Hadrien* and other works by her. In addition to highlighting the significance of these ideas in Yourcenar's work, I would emphasize the relevance of Yourcenar's preoccupation with existence, aesthetics and politics in the context of modernity. My aim, in the next chapter, shall be to demonstrate that Yourcenar's thought and writing are profoundly embedded in philosophical, cultural and literary modernity and that they frequently manage to shed unexpected light on it.

# CHAPTER THREE

## CULTURAL MODERNITY AND NARRATIVE AUTHENTICITY: YOURCENAR AND BENJAMIN

In 2000, an international conference was organized by the University of Thessaloniki and the Société Internationale d'Études Yourcenariennes to discuss the question: *Marguerite Yourcenar: Écrivain du XIXe siècle ?* That this question was asked about an author who was born and died in the twentieth century shows how Yourcenar's effort to dissociate herself from most literary and philosophical movements of her time left her susceptible to the criticism of being out of touch with the century in which she lived. By way of example, May Chehab, one of the participants in the conference, referred to various philosophies which are present in Yourcenar's work, including 'les philosophies présocratiques, [...] les religions orientales, [...] le néoplatonisme et Plotin en particulier', before asking: 'L'œuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar portant l'empreinte plus ou moins profonde de toutes ces philosophies, il est légitime de se demander si son éclectisme à première vue passéiste ne desservirait pas, lui aussi, les options de la modernité.'<sup>1</sup> Chehab went on to suggest that the renewal of interest in these philosophies at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century reflected a

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<sup>1</sup> May Chehab, 'Cerner l'être, une figure de la modernité ?', in Georges Fréris and R. Poignault (eds), *Marguerite Yourcenar: Écrivain du XIXe siècle ?* (Clermont-Ferrand: SIEY, 2004), pp. 75-83, (p. 76).

specifically modern tendency to delegitimize the subject of classicism. This tendency, argued Chehab, found a forceful expression in Nietzsche, whom Yourcenar had read well. Yourcenar was also an assiduous reader of pre-Socratic and oriental philosophies. Like many of her contemporaries, she looked in these philosophies for ways of interrogating essentialist approaches to subjectivity which, according to Chehab, were more persistent in France than in the rest of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Yourcenar's effort to understand the self non-essentially led to the development by her of a technique of 'closing in on being' ('cerner l'être'), as opposed to representing it directly. Chehab sees this technique as a sign of Yourcenar's modernity and gives her paper the title 'Cerner l'être, une figure de la modernité ?'. She claims that Yourcenar's autobiographical trilogy *Le Labyrinthe du monde*, whose subject is in fact Yourcenar's family rather than herself, can be understood in terms of the particularly modern consciousness of the unrepresentability of the 'I': 'Dans *Le Labyrinthe du monde*, l'impossible adéquation entre l'observé et l'observant sous-tend l'impossible réflexivité du discours du « moi ».'<sup>3</sup> Chehab's interpretation is not far from my understanding of the fleetingness and unrepresentability of the self in *Mémoires* and other novels by Yourcenar. But it has the merit of emphasizing the modernity of Yourcenar's approach.

I shall now begin to explore aspects of Yourcenar's specifically modern approach to the poetics of subjectivity and the problematic of representation. I shall be looking in her political thought and cultural criticism to see how they were informed by the new realities with which the West was faced, especially in the interwar years. I shall suggest that it was the specific cultural and philosophical context of modernity, as understood by Yourcenar, which enabled her to raise the interrelated issues of existential and narrative authenticity. Furthermore I shall argue that her answer to this problem, analysed in abstract terms in the previous chapters,

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<sup>2</sup> Chehab, 'Cerner l'être', p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> Chehab, 'Cerner l'être', p. 81.

can be directly associated with specific aspects of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century aesthetic and literary theory. Modernity will thus appear simultaneously as the problematic landscape of inauthenticity *and* as a privileged topos where the question of authenticity could be addressed and new approaches to politics, art and existence could be initiated. One of the thinkers that have studied modernity in similar terms is Walter Benjamin. In what follows, two of his essays will serve as pointers of a specifically modern sensitivity in relation to which Yourcenar's poetics and aesthetics will be appreciated.

### Yourcenar and cultural modernity

In her 1929 essay 'Diagnostic de l'Europe', Yourcenar used the metaphor of sickness to expose the wounds of 'un monde prêt à mourir'.<sup>4</sup> Based on an organic perception of history, this short essay re-iterates the rhetoric of decline which was typical of the interwar period. Europe is represented as a chronic patient threatened by imminent death. While Yourcenar writes in the name of Europe rather than that of a specific nation, her judgement is characterized by provincialism and inwardness. This exclusively European 'cosmopolitanism', which is in mortal danger of losing its virility and which resorts, desperate for help, to a semi-unconscious state of 'mystique' and 'hyperesthésie', is at the antipodes of the universalism that is assumed by many critics to infiltrate her work. She emphasizes the antithesis between classical European values – 'L' intelligence à l'état pur [...] entre la Baltique et la mer Égée' - and what she sees as the degeneration of these values in Europe from the Romantics onwards. On the one hand there is 'l'intelligence objective', 'la

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<sup>4</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar, 'Diagnostic de l'Europe', *EM*, pp. 1649-1655 (p. 1651). The 1991 Pléiade edition contains an annotation of 1982 by Yourcenar. First published in *Bibliothèque universelle et revue de Genève*, No 18, juin 1929, pp. 745-52.

pensée logique’, ‘la raison européenne’, ‘la connaissance’; on the other hand there is ‘[le] moi souffrant’, and the predominance of ‘le sentiment’, ‘la morale’, ‘la sensation’ and ‘la femme’.<sup>5</sup> The crescendo of Europe’s agony of death is conveyed by the sweeping vocabulary of the ‘Diagnostic’: ‘aboulie’, ‘ataxie’, ‘individualisme’, ‘simplisme’, ‘vulgarisation’, ‘barbarisme’, ‘désespoir’, ‘passivité’, ‘fléchissement’, ‘déformation’, ‘fatigue’, ‘maladie’, ‘mort’. The metaphor of Europe’s pathology is the product of a conservative and traditionalist mind in the metaphysical sense of these terms: it surmises the existence of a state of originality from which Europe has fallen, and reduces post-Enlightenment European history to a slow and fatal process of decomposition. Yourcenar’s critique reaches a climax in the following passage, where an interesting allusion is made to the failure of industrialization and technology to fulfil their promises:

L’économie traditionnelle n’a pas disparu seule dans le désastre financier; la civilisation toute entière s’est aperçu qu’elle cessait d’être. Étrange spectacle que celui d’une machine dont les rouages faussés par la catastrophe s’arrêtent ou tournent à vide. L’expression populaire est la plus juste : « tournent fou ».<sup>6</sup>

This feeling of insanity, this fear of the new, and the unease that technology engenders in the young Yourcenar cannot be easily reconciled with her contemplative admiration, twenty years on, for Hadrien, the innovator and cosmopolitan. Without wishing to place disproportionate emphasis on these early conclusions over Yourcenar’s more sophisticated criticism in later life, one cannot help but wonder how the traumatic experience of modernity shaped her perception of politics and aesthetics.

‘Diagnostic de l’Europe’ conveys a strong sense of loss of authenticity which infiltrates Yourcenar’s entire work. In this essay, authenticity is threatened by fragmentation and decay. As I discussed in the previous chapter, these are the very concepts which, because of the introduction of the parameter of time, make possible

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<sup>5</sup> All quotations from ‘Diagnostic de l’Europe’, pp. 1649-50.

<sup>6</sup> *EM*, p. 1651.

authentic representation and the paradoxical fulfilment of artistic intention, as Yourcenar suggests in her 1954 essay 'Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur'. In 1929, by contrast, the spectre of fragmentation as a specific aesthetic feature of modernity engenders panic. In the following passage, it is worth noticing the intricate parallel that Yourcenar draws between technology and fragmentation in art and literature.

La dissociation croissante du style n'est qu'un aspect de la dissociation des pensées, l'incapacité du cerveau à rétablir la suite logique des images. Elles sautent et s'échappent par saccades, comme les étincelles du moteur détraqué qui va cesser sa marche. Ce qui disparaît de l'art, c'est surtout la composition. Le style de Proust, subdivisé à l'extrême, confus à force d'abondance, débordé sans cesse par les pensées subies et non dirigées, le style de Breton, spasmodique et sec, tout en détentes et en tensions, alternent comme la prostration et l'excitation nerveuses.<sup>7</sup>

The convulsive body, the paroxysmal text and the dysfunctional machine combine to produce the monstrous image of modernity. The technological age has lost all dynamic for synthetic thinking and – at least in the case of Western Europe – has even abandoned the ambition for totalising narratives. The form of aesthetic representation that sets the tone and the rhythm of the new era is film. Yourcenar writes:

On tourne. Le cinématographe a enseigné la décomposition du mouvement : les romanciers l'imitent ; la vie tournée par l'un au ralenti, s'accélère dans les mains d'un autre opérateur. [...] L'esprit règle son rythme sur celui d'une vie de plus en plus agitée ; il travaille au millième de seconde. L'art, jadis lent élaborateur, se spécialise dans l'instantané. On peut dire que l'esprit européen acquit, dans les dernières années du XIXe siècle, la sensibilité d'une pellicule photographique.<sup>8</sup>

Film and photography as the forms of art par excellence that befit a mechanical and fragmented age are the themes of the celebrated 1936 essay by Walter Benjamin 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.<sup>9</sup> In this essay, Benjamin notices that technical reproducibility has cost the aesthetic artefact its aura, and therefore its authenticity, within the cultural context to which it belongs. He writes:

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<sup>7</sup> *EM*, p. 1653.

<sup>8</sup> *EM*, p. 1654.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Fontana Press, 1992), pp. 211-44.



‘the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence’.<sup>10</sup> The loss of authenticity, the assumption by art and culture of the formal characteristics of the machine, and the centrality of film in the cultural analysis of modernity constitute some of the startling similarities between Yourcenar’s and Benjamin’s essays.

These similarities go further and touch the sensitive issue of the political meaning of the loss of the aura / authenticity of the work of art. This is the part of the analysis where one would expect these two thinkers to differ mostly – as indeed they do in many ways. Nonetheless, implicit in both essays is the need to account for the blurring of the distinction between high and low art as a result of social emancipation and the expansion of mass culture. For Benjamin, the ‘transitoriness and reproducibility’ of aesthetic artefacts testify to an extremely heightened ‘sense of the universal equality of things’ among the masses. ‘The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope’, he notes.<sup>11</sup>

Further down, he contrasts the traditional ‘cult value’ of works of art to their specifically modern ‘exhibition value’. He points out that there is a ‘quantitative shift’ from the former to the latter ‘polar type’, whereby emphasis is now placed not on the works’ ‘existence’ but on their ‘being on view’. Not only has this situation affected the standards of aesthetic evaluation, it has also effected ‘a qualitative transformation of [the work’s] nature’.<sup>12</sup> The aesthetic object is changing to accommodate the new social norms of public accessibility - a movement that demonstrates modern art’s diminished power to signify. In a similar vein, Benjamin stresses the involvement of the masses in the process of weakening of writerly authority.

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art’, p. 219.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art’, p. 217.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art’, p. 218-19.

With the increasing extension of the press which kept placing new political, religious, scientific, professional, and local organs before the readers, an increasing number of readers became writers. [...] Thus the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. [...] Literary licence [...] thus becomes common property.<sup>13</sup>

Just as artistic originality is undermined by artistic plurality so literary authorship suffers from the common man's rise to the level of writer. In a more didactic manner, Yourcenar makes a very similar point. She remarks that in the (classical) past, a few venerated texts were all that was required for good education.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, 'Aujourd'hui, le prodigieux effort vulgarisateur du livre et du journal, hâtif toujours, maladroit souvent, permet à l'inexpérience du plus grand nombre l'illusion de l'universel savoir.'<sup>15</sup> As in 'The Work of Art', we learn that quantitative parameters have affected the type and quality of cultural production. Returning to the metaphor of the machine, Yourcenar compares modern culture to a workshop that is open for anyone to use and abuse. She refers to 'la masse, ruée dans ce laboratoire ouvert', and this idea of openness is strongly reminiscent of Benjamin's reference to 'the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly.'<sup>16</sup>

Yourcenar attempts to specify the historical period when the masses gained free access to this workshop for the first time. She writes that after the relative equilibrium of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century 'se produisit l'admirable poussée de libre intellectualisme qui précéda et amena la Révolution. C'est vers ce moment que l'esprit humain, trop chargé, fléchit.'<sup>17</sup> This statement is based on an unmistakably deterministic view of history. It maintains that when the historical moment was ripe, as it were, for the masses to be allowed into the sphere of the intellect, guarded till then by the select few, the first working-class revolution in history took place. If the

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 225.

<sup>14</sup> Yourcenar's precise expression is 'des textes peu nombreux, vénérés', *EM*, p. 1651. These adjectives encapsulate two main characteristics of the pre-modern artefact according to Benjamin, namely uniqueness and aura; both these characteristics, we are told, have vanished in modernity.

<sup>15</sup> *EM*, p. 1651.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 216-17.

<sup>17</sup> *EM*, p. 1650.

French Revolution was the early political expression of modernity, the first cultural expression of modernity was sickness of the mind due to intellectual congestion. The human spirit snaps, like the overburdened branch of a tree.<sup>18</sup>

At the point when Yourcenar's deterministic view of history enters into play, the differences between her essay and Benjamin's become palpable. As the metaphor of the overburdened branch already intimates, modernity is not an accident, nor is it a radical turning away from tradition. On the contrary, for Yourcenar, tradition is contained in the modern, and its tremendous duration and weight are the reasons behind contemporary neurosis. She writes:

la seule maladie dont une civilisation finisse par mourir, c'est sa durée. La nôtre est vieillie. Des vieilles civilisations elle a les aspects disparates et comme rapiécés d'histoire, le matérialisme lourd du plus grand nombre opposé au fol idéalisme du plus petit [...].<sup>19</sup>

Conversely, for Benjamin modernity represents the potential for 'a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind.'<sup>20</sup> Mechanical reproducibility initiates a radical departure from the tradition of the auratic object. Thus the social significance of film – the prototypically modern artefact – 'is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.'<sup>21</sup> The advent of the new brings about the elimination of the traditional. 'Destruction', 'catharsis', 'liquidation'

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<sup>18</sup> Yourcenar's vision of the end of European civilization is also reminiscent of Oswald Spengler's polemical 1918 study *Decline of the West*; Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. by Charles Francis Atkinson (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1926). As Bruno Tritsmans notes: 'L'apparement du regard historique à celui du visionnaire semble faire écho aux thèses d'Oswald Spengler du *Déclin de l'Occident* en 1918. [...] Tout se passe comme si Yourcenar s'en souvenait [...] quand elle stigmatise dans l'Europe des années 20 une "déchéance", une "maladie" – la métaphore spenglerienne par excellence – dont elle se veut "témoin".' Bruno Tritsmans, 'Opposition et esquivé dans *Alexis et la Nouvelle Eurydice*', *Bulletin de la Société Internationale d'Études Yourcenariennes*, No 5, septembre 1989, pp. 1-14, (p. 2).

<<http://www.yourcenariana.org/pdf/bull05/02Tritsmans.pdf>>, [accessed on 29/08/2007].

<sup>19</sup> *EM*, p. 1654.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 215.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 215.

leave no doubt that the new is not a degeneration of the traditional and is not even generated from it. It contains nothing of it.

While an analysis of Benjamin's long-debated relation to tradition lies beneath the scope of my thesis, it is worth pursuing the search for affinities and differences between 'The Work of Art' and 'Diagnostic de l'Europe' a little further. Comparative examination of these two essays will help elucidate Yourcenar's perception of the aesthetic and philosophical stakes of modernity. The question arises as to whether Benjamin in the 'Work of Art' is implicitly critical of the idea of tradition's obliteration, the abolition of the aura, and the rise of the masses as Yourcenar clearly is in her essay. Benjamin is certainly ironic about the pseudo-expertise of the movie-goer and the newspaper reader.<sup>22</sup> In a more serious vein, he clarifies that he does not think of cinema as an inherently revolutionary medium. More specifically, Benjamin writes: 'So long as the movie makers' capital sets the fashion, as a rule no other revolutionary merit can be accredited to today's film than the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art.'<sup>23</sup> While by its very structure film challenges traditional aesthetic theory and practice, it does not necessarily harbour a socially subversive potential.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Benjamin places particular emphasis on 'that oppression, that new anxiety which, according to Pirandello, grips the actor before the camera'.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, Yourcenar also mentions Pirandello in 'Diagnostic', although, for her, he is, together with Rilke and Gide, a good representative of the end of an era: '[ils] représentent assez bien ce point d'aboutissement'.<sup>26</sup> But there is another, even

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<sup>22</sup> The relevant point is made in Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 225.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 224.

<sup>24</sup> On this point, see Susan Buck-Morss's comment: 'Clearly, in a world where mass media was being used for anything but critical enlightenment, Benjamin's affirmation of film and other forms of mechanical reproduction was addressed to the cognitive potential of such media, not their present practice.' In Susan Buck-Morss, 'Benjamin's Passagen-Werk: Redeeming Mass Culture for the Revolution', *New German Critique*, No 29 (Spring Semester, 1983), pp. 211-240, (p. 214, note 8).

<sup>25</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 224.

<sup>26</sup> *EM*, p. 1655.

more intriguing link between Yourcenar and Benjamin, with regard to Pirandello's comment on the anxiety felt by the film actor. There is an episode in Yourcenar's 1934 novel *Denier du rêve*, in which the fictional screen actress Angiola Fidès watches one of her films in a Roman movie theatre and experiences a feeling of alienation before her own image. Incapable of identifying with her phantom-double on screen, which is both more real and less real than herself, Angiola feels 'comme devant un miroir'<sup>27</sup>. Benjamin uses the same analogy, albeit with reference not to the movie screen but to the movie camera, as part of the process of film production: 'The feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera, as Pirandello describes it, is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one's image in the mirror.'<sup>28</sup>

To a certain extent at least, Benjamin and Yourcenar share the same reservations with regard to the loss of aura and its historical and existential implications. Nonetheless, at various points in the Artwork essay Benjamin is markedly more radical than Yourcenar. As we saw already, he suggests that the 'contemporary crisis' promises 'the renewal of mankind'. He writes: 'in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, [the technique of reproduction] reactivates the object reproduced'.<sup>29</sup> This can be taken as a criticism of the traditional distance, that is, the aura surrounding the aesthetic artefact; by implication, the aura *de-activates* the work of art, neutralizes its dynamic for interaction, transforms it into an object of cult. Commenting on this point, Howard Caygill notes: 'the object is reactivated when the qualities of distance and uniqueness are removed from it; it becomes something different, something which need no

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<sup>27</sup> OR, p. 240. *Denier du rêve* was originally published in 1934: *Denier du rêve* (Paris: Grasset, 1934). It was thoroughly reworked by Yourcenar in 1958-59: *Denier du rêve* (Paris: Plon, 1959). This more recent edition is included in OR. The movie theatre scene has been analyzed in similar terms to those of the present dissertation in Erin G. Carlston, *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 103-107.

<sup>28</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 224.

<sup>29</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 215.

longer be experienced in terms of presence and absence.’<sup>30</sup> For Caygill, in ‘The Work of Art’, Benjamin is unequivocally critical of the cult value of the traditional artefact and celebrates the destruction of tradition and the attendant loss of authenticity in art. Caygill writes: ‘This ability to distance its viewer marks the authenticity of the work of art, and is what Benjamin described *critically* as its “cult value”’.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, despite his reservations, Benjamin placed emphasis on the emancipatory potential of the modern work of art, while Yourcenar ‘diagnosed’ in modernity an irreversible process of decay. This is why the central concept of the ‘Work of Art’ is reproducibility, while that of ‘Diagnostic’ is its flip side, namely, fragmentation.

In the Artwork essay, Benjamin contrasts painting and film, and points out that ‘there is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments *which are assembled under a new law*’.<sup>32</sup> The specifically modern possibility of a new assemblage, governed by a law whose relevance I will discuss further down, is altogether lacking from ‘Diagnostic’. What we see instead in Yourcenar’s essay is a lament for the contemporary impossibility of the total work of art, compounded by the apocalyptic intuition of the telos of aesthetics. Indeed, in the last sentence of ‘Diagnostic de l’Europe’, Yourcenar summarizes her diagnosis of the aesthetics of her time and her prognosis of the non-aesthetics of the future as follows: ‘résignés d’avance aux ténèbres qui vont suivre, assistons [...] au bouquet final du feu d’artifice d’un monde’.<sup>33</sup> The final sparks of a luminous era, that of the Enlightenment, will be followed by darkness. As I discussed above, the death of European culture and art is a deterministic and organicist notion; it implies that art and culture as products of reason contain the seeds of their undoing.

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<sup>30</sup> Howard Caygill, ‘Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition’, in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (eds), *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy, Destruction and Experience* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), 1-30, (p. 24).

<sup>31</sup> Caygill p. 24, emphasis added by the author.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art’, p. 227, my emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> *EM*, p. 1655.

It is of especial significance that Yourcenar sees the end of culture as brought about by cultural diversity, and the demise of tradition as a consequence of an excess of traditions. She writes: 'Les cervaux mal préparés ploient sur la diversité des connaissances ; les cadres de la culture, à force de s'élargir, se sont brisés'.<sup>34</sup> It is difficult to resist the criticism of provinciality and narrowness of perspective, even as Yourcenar explains the process by which the legacy of the past lost its functionality and became a burden on man:

Toute conception philosophique de la vie est un legs lentement accru par l'histoire. [...] De nos jours, ces legs d'époques différentes, objets d'interminables controverses, accablent par leur multiplicité. Dans cette Europe qui s'organise péniblement en État unique, le passé est un immense héritage en litige.<sup>35</sup>

In principle, this summary statement on tradition and history is in agreement with Yourcenar's perception of history, later in life, as an interminable process of representations by philosophical, political or artistic means. However, in *Mémoires*, Hadrien, who is keenly aware of this state of affairs, considers the historical predicament of his time as a unique opportunity to redefine authentic subjectivity. To this effect, he attempts to develop a *technique de liberté* which, as I discussed in Chapter 1, consists in 'acquiescing' to this mode of creation and attribution of meaning, in order to point out its lacunae. In terms of my analysis, this means that between 'Diagnostic' and *Mémoires*, Yourcenar's perception of modern aesthetics and politics underwent an important transformation. In 1949, modernity was no longer understood by her as the quasi-Nietzschean, quasi-nihilistic moment of intellectual aphasia, but as a moment of metaphysical solitude and potential freedom.

Already in 'Diagnostic' there are signs of this subsequent development. In a final twist in this essay, when Yourcenar announces the agonising consummation of the drama of representation, she also celebrates the beauty of the time she lives in. 'Je n'ai tant dit que notre époque est malade que pour me réserver de dire à la fin qu'elle

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<sup>34</sup> *EM*, p. 1651.

<sup>35</sup> *EM*, p. 1652.

est belle.’<sup>36</sup> To be sure, she refers to the ironic phantasmagoria of the firework display, not to the ironic beauty of the ruins, as in ‘Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur’. The fact remains that already at the time of ‘Diagnostic’ she is in search of a new aesthetics that originates from within the end of all aesthetics. She writes: ‘Mais le prix dûment acquitté nous donne le droit de jouir d’un spectacle si divers. N’assiste pas qui veut à celui d’un achèvement. Achevé : fini – le mot contient à la fois le sens de la perfection et celui de l’arrêt.’<sup>37</sup> The beauty of decay that follows classical perfection is, of course, a central theme in Yourcenar’s work. But in 1929, this theme is still too closely tied to the concept of ongoing fragmentation that prefigures the end of all culture. At that time she still fails to see how ‘multiple fragments can be assembled under a new law’, as Benjamin would claim a few years later. By 1954, in ‘Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur’, Yourcenar has found a way out of the symbolics of the fragment as a prefiguration of death. In the latter essay she discusses a new ‘law’ according to which time re-authenticates the work of art by submitting it to an irrevocable process of destruction. As I discussed in the previous chapter, this process deconstructs the symbolic content of the work of art and restores its representational value in an unexpected way. The decaying work of art represents reality authentically, while the freshly made work of art conceals its inauthenticity – the arbitrariness of the codes of signification which made its ‘creation’ possible. During this process, the traditional meaning of authenticity is reversed; what was previously considered as original and authentic is now proved to be a copy, while authenticity is found in the scattered ruins and is designated as a state of fragmentation. I would now submit that already in 1936, in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, Benjamin alluded to the same process of reversal of significations as a characteristic of modernity.

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<sup>36</sup> *EM*, p. 1655

<sup>37</sup> *EM*, p. 1655.



## Authenticity and illusion

Part XI of 'The Work of Art', where Benjamin compares the staging of plays to the shooting of films, is one of the most widely debated of this essay. His analysis of the illusory character of the cinematic medium has been variously criticized as theoretically inconsistent and hailed as a refined moment of synthesis of his politics and his messianic preoccupation. As in my previous comments on Benjamin, my aim here is not so much to contribute to that discussion as to identify elements in his theory that help locate Yourcenar's work squarely in the context of aesthetic modernity. More specifically, in Benjamin's analysis of modernity I expect to discern novel determinations of authenticity which may also be central to Yourcenar's writing and implicit theory of representation.

Benjamin observes that while theatre involves some effort on the part of the viewer to produce the illusion of reality, cinema as a medium presents a view of reality that is completely free from apparatus; as such, it requires a lower level of concentration and delivers a spectacle of higher verisimilitude. Benjamin brings into sharp focus this paradox which he takes to be a major development in aesthetics: 'The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology.'<sup>38</sup> This amounts to saying that the technological age creates new ways of re-instating authenticity in representation. It does so, not by avoiding, or avoiding to acknowledge, the processes of mediation employed in aesthetic production, but by making the most of these processes. Immediacy is here the result of the inevitable excess of mediation ('the height of the artifice') in very much the same way that authenticity, in Yourcenar's work, is the paradoxical outcome of the irrevocable fall into inauthenticity.

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<sup>38</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 226.

Notably, the ‘sight of immediate reality’ achieved in film possesses the principal attribute of the canonically authentic object: namely, aura. In her essay ‘Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: “The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology”’, Miriam Hansen points out that the ‘orchid’ of the quotation above translates in an unconvincing way ‘the proverbial “blue flower” of German Romanticism, Novalis’ “*blaue Blume*”’. She continues by asking: ‘Why did Benjamin choose, albeit with a shade of irony, the highly auratic metaphor of the Blue Flower – the unattainable object of the romantic quest, the incarnation of desire?’<sup>39</sup> This question continues to puzzle critics, some of whom have taken Benjamin’s statement at face value – perhaps rightfully so – and have thus accused him of intellectual shortsightedness: ‘He does not see that, independent of the genesis of cinematic images – in which artifice, tricks and manipulation play an important role – the completed film presents a more convincing illusion of reality than does any other art form.’<sup>40</sup> This is the conclusion which Rainer Rochlitz thinks that Benjamin should have drawn from the ‘*blaue Blume*’ passage. However, as we saw above, Benjamin does criticize the technically empowered process of emotional and ideological manipulation that has characterized film production in the West from the start. At a different part of the Artwork essay, he writes: ‘In Western Europe the capitalistic exploitation of the film denies consideration to modern man’s legitimate claim to being reproduced. Under these circumstances the film industry is trying hard to spur the interest of the masses through illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations.’<sup>41</sup> Beyond the context of film theory, some critics have tried to understand the metaphor of the *blaue Blume* in the broader terms of the relation between illusion and reality under modernity. Far from a belated call for the return of the auratic element, Susan Buck-

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<sup>39</sup> Both quotations from Miriam Hansen, ‘Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology’, in *New German Critique*, No 40, Special Issue on Weimar Film Theory (Winter, 1987), pp. 179-224, (p. 204).

<sup>40</sup> Rainer Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin*, trans. by Jane Marie Todd (London: The Guildford Press, 1996), p. 177.

<sup>41</sup> Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art’, p. 226.

Morss reads 'The Work of Art' as an attempt at setting the tone for a modern analysis of the social function of mechanically reproduced illusion. In her essay 'Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*: Redeeming Mass Culture for the Revolution', she suggests that Benjamin's 'artwork essay argues theoretically for the transformation of art from illusory representation into an analysis of illusions'. As a politicized art form, film's function is 'not to duplicate illusion as real, but to interpret reality as itself illusion.'<sup>42</sup> In other words, the evocation of the blue flower does not signify Benjamin's putative attachment to a primordial state of authenticity but illustrates the idea that such a state is an imaginary construct. Furthermore, the image of the blue flower 'in the land of technology' implies that modernity is a privileged framework for examining the social and aesthetic forces at work in the configuration of this construct. Modernity is not a context within which illusion replaces reality; it rather is the condition under which all reality can see itself historically as illusion.

It is this specifically modern awareness of the swapping of roles between reality and illusion that I find sufficiently close to the reversal of meanings between authenticity and its opposite in the work of Marguerite Yourcenar. In the same way that the fragments of old statues are eloquent testimony to the inauthenticity of the 'original' sculpture, the fragmentary character of film can reveal the illusory character of reality. Conversely, for Yourcenar, modernity allows us to redefine authenticity as a series of cracks and scars left on the aesthetic body which at the moment of its coming into being was considered pure; in the same vein, for Benjamin, modernity allows us to understand reality as a process of mediations, distortions and falsifications which had hitherto been assigned to a supposedly separate domain, that of 'illusion' or 'representation'.

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<sup>42</sup> All quotations from Susan Buck-Morss, p. 214. Buck-Morss's argument, which I summarize here, refers primarily to Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*; however she clarifies that it applies equally to 'The Work of Art'.

Discussing Benjamin's remark that the movie scene's 'illusionary nature is that of the second degree'<sup>43</sup>, Hansen suggests that film reclaims a truthful representation of reality by further distorting reality's already distorted image. The redeeming agency of film is based on 'a logic of double negation'.<sup>44</sup> In Part XI of 'The Work of Art', and more specifically in the reference to the 'blue flower', Hansen perceives

an echo of the 'distortion of distortion' that Benjamin traces in the work of Proust [...] Accordingly, 'the equipment-free aspect of reality' [...] seems to me linked in whatever alienated and refracted manner, to that 'homesickness for the world distorted in the state of resemblance' which Proust's writing pursued to the point of asphyxiation. Such film practice, however, would have to [...] lend its mimetic capability to a 'world in which the true surrealist face of existence breaks through'.<sup>45</sup>

This is a legitimate hypothesis about the way certain forms of art and writing in modernity manipulate established mechanisms of representation in order to produce newly valid images of reality: images which are authentic insofar as they are products of a 'second degree' of artistic mediation and distortion.

The convoluted technique of re-authentication of image/narrative to which Hansen refers here is by no means alien to the Yourcenarian idea of the *technique de liberté*. Hadrien's way of dealing with such mechanisms of conceptualization of experience as religion, philosophy and poetry ('Animula vagula blandula') is to adopt and counter-manipulate these mechanisms with the aim of demonstrating their estranging effect at both an existential and a political level. With reference to Yourcenar's literary criticism, the same applies to Cavafy's (but also Thomas Mann's and André Gide's) choice of *acceptation* over *révolte*.<sup>46</sup> *Acceptation* signifies appropriation of institutionalized forms of abstraction and schematization of *le vécu* – e.g. in the case of Cavafy, Christian Orthodoxy – in order to produce versions of reality that do justice to the uniqueness of the individual. It is because of the

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<sup>43</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 226.

<sup>44</sup> Miriam Hansen, p. 203.

<sup>45</sup> Miriam Hansen, pp. 204-205. Hansen quotes here from Benjamin's essay on Proust: 'The Image of Proust', in *Illuminations*, pp. 197-210, (p. 200).

<sup>46</sup> I am referring here to Yourcenar's essays on Constantin Cavafy, Thomas Mann and André Gide, which I have discussed previously in the present thesis.

emancipatory effect achieved by means of the acceptance and twisting of canonical concepts, symbols and norms that Yourcenar can write in her monograph on Cavafy that ‘la révolte se pose ici à l’intérieur de l’acquiescement’.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, Yourcenar’s narrative technique can also be considered as an alternative application of the modernist device of ‘distortion of distortion’. As has already been noted, Yourcenar is aware of the way linguistic representation tends to standardise meaning and superimpose metaphysical and ideological interpretations to experience. At a time when literature responds to this by revolutionising narrative, e.g. in the *nouveau roman*, Yourcenar insists on realism as the properly and fundamentally distortive fictionalising mechanism. She strives for extreme control over the linguistic medium and dissimulates authorial presence in the same way that the camera operates as an instrument of extreme censorship banning all apparatus out of the image. As I wrote previously, Yourcenar’s realism does not, in principle, aim at the interpretation of the sensible and *le vécu*, but at its phenomenological recording; one critic has pointed out that the camera in Benjamin’s Artwork essay plays essentially the same role: ‘The “web of circumstances” into which the camera penetrates [...] salvages phenomenological immediacy as the telos of artifice.’<sup>48</sup> Thus, the effect of double mediation is the loss of the metaphysical identity, the aura, of the object, which lends itself to the senses as a mere signifier. In Yourcenar’s narrative as well as in cinematic representation according to Benjamin, realism loses its ontological implications. Nothing in the artefact denotes the autonomous existence of the depicted image, while numerous elements indicate its strictly phenomenological nature.

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<sup>47</sup> See note 50, Chapter 1.

<sup>48</sup> Gertrud Koch, ‘Cosmos in Film: On the Concept of Space in Walter Benjamin’s “Work of Art” Essay’, trans. by Nancy Rotero, in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (eds), *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy, Destruction and Experience* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), pp. 202-11, (p. 209).

## Collecting fragments

In the context of my parallel discussion of Benjamin's and Yourcenar's aesthetics and poetics it is important to ask what world the process of controlled distortion makes it possible to see. Contrary to Benjamin's expectation, it is not 'the true surrealist face of existence' that Yourcenar's narrative ultimately unveils – at least not in the strict sense understood by the surrealists themselves, of whose work she did not think very highly. By way of example, in her essay on Roger Caillois, whom she succeeded in the Académie Française, she identifies surrealism with the literature of fantasy, which, for her, is artificial and fictitious. '[Le] surréalisme l'a profondément marqué [i.e. Caillois] [...]. Mais la *rigueur obstinée* qui le distingua toujours lui a vite fait sentir la différence entre le fantastique d'ordre littéraire, toujours si proche du factice et du fabriqué, et l'étrange ou l'inexpliqué véritables'.<sup>49</sup> For Yourcenar, fragmentation is not a device employed impressionistically to ensure narrative authenticity, but a necessary existential state to which language can only refer in a negative way. Yourcenar's narrative constructions may have the elegance of neoclassical architecture, but they are consciously made of what she perceives to be the ruins of classicism. Her realist narratives refer directly to these ruins as the apparent signifieds which operate as allegories (in de Man's sense) of the fragmented relationship between man and the world. Therefore the world that Yourcenar's realism makes it possible to see resists semiotic representation: it cannot be reduced to the narrative fragments which make it up and which cannot be synthesized into a

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<sup>49</sup> *EM*, p. 538, emphasis in the original. Yourcenar's essay on Caillois, 'L'homme qui aimait les pierres', is included in her posthumous collection of essays *En pèlerin et en étranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989). On Yourcenar and surrealism, see also her letter to Nicolas Calas (18 February 1962), in which Yourcenar writes, '[je] n'ai jamais été entraînée dans l'orbite du surréalisme, et [je] tends à le considérer comme un mouvement étrangement faussé dès son origine'. *Marguerite Yourcenar: Lettres à ses amis et quelques autres*, ed. by Michèle Sarde et al (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), pp. 200-204, (p. 202). In another letter of the same collection she refers to Breton as a 'magicien pris au piège'; (Letter to Gisèle Freund, 30 August 1977, pp. 728-729, p. 728).

total image. A fundamental similarity can be established between this world and the one captured by the cameraman in 'The Work of Art'. To examine it, I will now turn to Benjamin's suggestion that the image obtained by 'the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law'.<sup>50</sup>

As it is made clear from Benjamin's comparison between painting and shooting, this new law contrasts with that of traditional pictorial representation in that it imposes no distance between the work of art and the artist or the viewer, and therefore refuses to deliver the totality of the object. This law governs a 'representation of reality' which 'offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that', writes Benjamin, 'is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art.'<sup>51</sup> Here, we are invited to ask what this law might be that makes possible a non-total assemblage of fragments, but does not fail to satisfy the modern viewer's desire for authenticity in the image.

Another celebrated essay by Benjamin, already mentioned in Chapter 2, 'The Task of the Translator', can help us furnish a preliminary answer to that question by opening a new perspective. In this essay, written in 1923, Benjamin discusses translation as a type of philosophical work whose aim is to let the primordial relationship between the language of the original and that of the translation appear as a 'kinship' that encompasses all languages and is therefore situated beyond history. He writes:

All suprahistorical kinship of languages rests in the intention underlying each language as a whole – an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realized only by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language. While all individual elements of foreign languages – words, sentences, structure – are mutually exclusive, these languages supplement one another in their intentions. Without distinguishing the intended object from the mode of intention, no firm grasp of this basic law of a philosophy of language can be achieved.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> See n. 32, this chapter.

<sup>51</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 227.

<sup>52</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', in *Illuminations*, pp. 70-82, (p. 74-75).

‘The law of a philosophy of language’ is relevant to the law under which multiple fragments are assembled by the cameraman in the ‘Work of Art’ essay. To be sure, translation as an intralinguistic, or even metalinguistic, activity is essentially different from the act of literary or artistic representation. Nonetheless, Benjamin considers translation as a special form of reproduction, during which a new fragment, the translation, is created alongside, and owing to, another fragment, namely, the original piece of literature. It follows from the passage quoted above that these fragments can be assembled into a new entity, the ‘greater’ or ‘pure’ language, *die reine Sprache*, which is now described as the ‘totality of the intentions’ of all languages. Benjamin explains what this process of assembling consists of, using the well-known analogy of the vessel:

Fragments of a vessel which are to be articulated together must follow one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of making itself similar to the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail, in its own language, form itself according to the manner of meaning of the original, to make both recognisable as the broken parts of the greater language, just as fragments are the broken parts of a vessel.<sup>53</sup>

A number of issues may be raised with regard to this aspect of Benjamin’s theory of language, not least of all the question of its theological provenance and undertones. In his essay on Benjamin’s ‘Task of the Translator’, Paul de Man, drawing from an book by Gershom Scholem and an article by Carl Jacobs, points out that the image of the broken vessel originates from the Lurianic Kabbalah.<sup>54</sup> The theological question and its specific Judaic parameters will inevitably permeate my discussion about the law that governs the assemblage of fragments into a new primordial entity, but they will have to remain outside my immediate context of reference. Besides, the importance of de Man’s commentary on the analogy of the vessel can be

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<sup>53</sup> I am using here Andrew Benjamin’s translation – slightly amended to maintain syntactical consistency - for reasons that will become clear immediately. Andrew Benjamin, *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy* (Routledge: London, 1989), p. 100.

<sup>54</sup> De Man, ‘Conclusions’, p. 90. De Man refers to: Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971); and Carol Jacobs, ‘The Monstrosity of Translation’, *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 90, No 6, (Dec., 1975), pp. 755-766, (p. 763).



demonstrated in philosophical terms alone. De Man sees through the totalistic impulse which led to errors in the English translation of Benjamin's essay, a translation which suggests that the vessel is fully re-constructible and thus affirms the concept of pre-lapsarian unity of language (the Babel myth). He points out some of translator Harry Zohn's slips and then argues that the analogy of the vessel serves the idea of an original and perpetual dislocation of language:

What we have here is an initial fragmentation; any work is totally fragmented in relation to this *reine Sprache*, with which it has nothing in common, and every translation is a fragment, is breaking the fragment – so the vessel keeps breaking, constantly – and never reconstitutes it; there was no vessel in the first place, or we have no knowledge of the vessel, or no awareness, no access to it, so for all intents and purposes there has never been one.<sup>55</sup>

De Man's attempt to inscribe Benjamin's philosophy of language into the context of poststructuralist linguistic theory is convincing. He explains that 'The Task of the Translator' by no means establishes the existence of a (natural, rational or dialectic) relationship between the linguistic fragment and 'pure language'. On the contrary, despite what he calls 'tropological errors' in Benjamin's essay (by which he means figures of speech implying a closure of meaning - including the simile of the vessel itself), the German original text explains beyond any doubt the discrepancy between 'Gemeinte' and 'Art des Meinens'.<sup>56</sup> This means that language as such is essentially different from its topical instantiations in actual writing and cannot be reduced to them. Writing is a process of reproduction of fragments whose assemblage does not amount to any totality.

This conclusion answers to some extent my question regarding the nature of the law that governs a non-total assemblage of fragments. This law is specific to the work of the translator, whose task is 'lovingly and in detail' to maintain the differential relationship that exists between linguistic fragments and language in its pure, formal state. Benjamin suggests that the translator processes the original text in

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<sup>55</sup> De Man, 'Conclusions', p. 91.

<sup>56</sup> De Man, 'Conclusions', p. 87.

such a way that it retains its quality as *logos*, but loses its capacity to mean.<sup>57</sup> He gives the example of Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles which, de Man writes, 'are absolutely literal, word by word, and which are therefore totally unintelligible; what comes out is completely incomprehensible, completely undoes the sentence'.<sup>58</sup> Literal translation is therefore a form of distortion of the original, which is already distorted in relation to pure language, since it is contaminated with intentionality. Following the logic of this argument, it is plausible to say that translation is a corrective distortion, for it calls our attention to language *per se* – a movement which is missing from the original text with its disproportionate emphasis on meaning. In that respect, translation resembles camera work which, as we saw, effects an illusion of second degree: by distorting an already distorted representation it produces an image of pure reality which, like the always broken vessel, is itself an illusion. Just as pure reality depends on the cinematic image so that it may 'exist' only as its missing signified, so pure language needs translation so that it may be posited as the illusion of the unity of languages.

The world that this double distortion makes it possible to see is one where the aporia between the specific contaminated fragment and totality in its pure state becomes evident. Paul de Man describes this world and its existential and historical dimensions in poignant terms: 'Now it is this motion, this errancy of language that never reaches the mark, which is always displaced in relation to what it meant to reach, it is this errancy of language, this illusion of life that is only an afterlife, that Benjamin calls history.'<sup>59</sup> I have already referred to this controversial passage, in the context of my discussion on authenticity and history, in the previous chapter. I then expressed reservations with respect to de Man's concept of the a-historicity of the

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<sup>57</sup> Benjamin writes: 'In the realm of translation, too, the words *εν αρχη ην ο λογος* (in the beginning was the word) apply.' The *logos* corresponds to language proper which Benjamin sharply distinguishes here from the expressive / communicative function of language. Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', p. 79.

<sup>58</sup> De Man, 'Conclusions', p. 88.

<sup>59</sup> De Man, 'Conclusions', p. 92.

subject and I explained why I thought there was a discrepancy between his and Yourcenar's perceptions of authenticity. This important point aside, it is now possible to understand better the affinity between Benjamin's analogy of the vessel, de Man's interpretation of it, and Yourcenar's realism. Yourcenar's narrative conforms to the same 'law of assembling fragments' to which Benjamin first referred in relation to the cinematic technique and of which de Man also was aware in his reading of Benjamin's translation essay. In the case of Yourcenar, this law applies both at the level of writerly technique and at the level of the topics she chose to explore, insofar as her narrative can be metaphorized as a process of collection of ruins. Whether they may be the ruins of personal or historical past or the ruins of realism itself, they constitute fragments whose assemblage does not amount to any form of reality or authenticity in the traditional sense.

Following the simile of the fragmented vessel, we may choose to read Yourcenar's fiction negatively, as an inventory of ruins, that is, of idle, nonfunctional signs pointing to a putatively original state that has existed only in people's imagination. The harmonious proportions of this inventory – namely, the classical structure of Yourcenar's narratives, for which she has been many times praised and sometimes derided – simply convey the idea that, in modernity, there is still only one way to write or make art: representation cannot rid itself from the mimetic principle and can at best refer to what cannot be represented in a negative way. However, it is also possible to read Yourcenar's fiction positively, following the paradigm of the movie camera. Like the invisible cameraman, she strives to achieve the effect of absolute realism and thus to rectify the reader's vision by demonstrating reality's illusory character. Devoid of nostalgia or hope of re-instating the putative authenticity of the real, she contends herself with describing the traces of a past which can only be hypothesized or posited. In that, her work is comparable to Cavafy's poetic transformation of the ruins of Hellenistic Alexandria and Piranesi's depiction of the ruins of Rome. She also shares with them the ambition of

pinpointing the existence of the original work of art in the ruin and that of the ruin in the original work of art. Thus, as I explained in the previous chapter, she establishes a new, authentically referential relationship, not between the work of art and what it is supposed to symbolize, but between the ruins and the forces ('time', the 'absent cause', 'initial fragmentation'...) that produce these ruins.

### The paradigm of translation

It is no coincidence that both Yourcenar and Benjamin use the imagery of Greek and Roman antiquities to evoke a difference of ontological nature. It is the difference between, on the one hand, fragments, which are available to us as promises of a totality that they never deliver, and on the other, the totality itself that exceeds the sum of these fragments. Benjamin's broken vessel certainly constitutes the paradigmatic image illustrating this difference, especially in the context of the theory of translation and its philosophical expansions. But Yourcenar as a writer of historical fiction has *enacted* this difference, by working with fragments of the past (e.g. in a literal sense, the little that remains from emperor Hadrian's writings) and producing new works that are themselves fragments. The originally fragmentary character of Yourcenar's fiction is especially pronounced in the case of *Mémoires*, a novel that never aspires to the unifying narrative of history and which owes part of its 'authenticity' to additional narrative elements and references that cannot be proven scientifically to be authentic. It could be argued that in writing historical fiction, Yourcenar acts not as an original writer - for such a role would not be consistent with the primacy of *reconstruire* over *construire*, as I have discussed, – but as a translator, in Benjamin's sense; rather than interpreting the remains of the past in such a way as to create a new historical narrative (which would be the equivalent of creative translation, the translation of meanings and authorial intentions, rejected by

Benjamin), she offers new fragmented narratives alongside the older ones. She thus manages to make visible the difference that exists between these individual stories and the grand narratives that serve as the basis of historical interpretation.

In 'The Task of the Translator', Benjamin specifies that translators enact, rather than produce, the differential relationship between linguistic fragment and language proper: '[Translation] cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself; but it can represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form.'<sup>60</sup> Yourcenar, on the other hand, describes clearly the process of writing *Mémoires d'Hadrien* as an exercise in a form of translation that is very close to Benjamin's definition. In 'Ton et langage dans le roman historique', an essay in which she examined questions of authenticity in the reproduction of the 'voice' of a historical period, she asked:

Mais en quelle langue avais-je supposé qu'Hadrien, bilingue, me dictait ses *Mémoires* ? Tantôt en latin, sans doute, et tantôt en grec, ce qui m'offrait un certain jeu. Il y a pourtant des moments où, par inadvertance, je lui ai fait parler le français de mon temps.<sup>61</sup>

To write that Hadrien was dictating his memoirs to Yourcenar, and in Latin too, is perhaps for her to exaggerate the idea of empathetic identification between writer and main fictional character, so subtly explored in the 'Carnets de notes de *Mémoires d'Hadrien*'. Nevertheless, this is still a metaphor of considerable theoretical interest. Yourcenar implies that her novel can be seen as a translation from Greek and Latin into French, with only sporadic bits of what we would conventionally recognize as original literature. As a device to promote the idea of the genuineness of *Mémoires*, this would be too obvious and naïve. Besides, Yourcenar clarifies in just the paragraph that follows the above quotation that she would not object to the description of her novel as '*mémoires imaginaires*'.<sup>62</sup> The point of presenting

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<sup>60</sup> Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', p. 73.

<sup>61</sup> EM, p. 296. 'Ton et langage dans le roman historique' (written 1972), is included in *Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur*.

<sup>62</sup> EM, p. 297.

*Mémoires* as a translation and indeed as a play with languages ('un certain jeu'), is to recognize it as a supplement to the literary and scholarly bibliography which Yourcenar meticulously appended at the end of the book – a rare and significant move for a work of fiction. The novel thus stands self-consciously as a fragment among other linguistic fragments, as the outcome of a metalinguistic play whose essence is not located only in its meaning but also in its structure and process.

As if to prove the fundamentally unoriginal and essentially linguistic character of her text as translation, Yourcenar puts it to the ultimate translation test, namely back translation. She writes:

J'eus l'occasion de vérifier comme à l'aide d'une pierre de touche l'authenticité d'un autre passage. Un professeur demanda à ses élèves de traduire en grec (j'aimerais pouvoir dire *retraduire*) la page de l'empereur qui décrit l'état d'atonie qui suivit chez lui la mort d'Antinoüs. Je m'obligeais à faire de même. Immédiatement, des *addenda* d'un ton plus moderne devinrent aussi visibles que le plâtre qui rejointoie deux fragments de statue.<sup>63</sup>

The similarity between the images that Yourcenar and Benjamin use to illustrate the work of translation, namely, the fragments of a statue and the fragments of a vessel, is indeed striking. As a writer, Yourcenar pieces together fragments of the source languages and fragments of the target language, in a manner which is very similar to that of what Benjamin calls a 'genuine translator'.<sup>64</sup> The experiment of back translation serves to make visible the difference between languages, as the metaphor of the *plâtre* clearly shows. Just like the plaster used by the archaeologist helps identify broken pieces of a statue as parts of a larger whole, so the French *addenda* used by Yourcenar in the process of translation are essential in making all linguistic fragments recognizable as parts of language as such. The metaphor of the *plâtre* brings Yourcenar as a translator very close to Benjamin's injunction that both the

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<sup>63</sup> *EM*, p. 296, emphasis in the original.

<sup>64</sup> This expression is in Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', p. 76.

original and the translation must be made '*recognisable* as the broken parts of the greater language.'<sup>65</sup>

In line with my argument so far, Andrew Benjamin has attached especial importance to the recognizability as such of the fragments of the vessel in Walter Benjamin's analogy. In his essay 'Walter Benjamin and the Translator's Task', he argued that the totality to which the different linguistic fragments (including the translation itself) refer in order to make themselves recognizable as parts of it is not one that precedes them, but one that is posited by them and which is futural in its essence.<sup>66</sup> The translator's task consists in showing that present in both the source and the target texts is 'the greater language', the possibility of a totality which contains difference and the promise of 'a harmony which is the belonging together of differences.'<sup>67</sup>

The 'pure language' [...] is not a language. It is language. It marks the sameness of languages while allowing for their differences. What comes to be released by the translator is the language inhering in a language. However it is a language that itself cannot be translated, that cannot be put into words. It is the 'expressionless and creative Word', that was in the beginning.<sup>68</sup>

The messianic underpinning of this idea is unmistakable, but its significance for contemporary critical thought is also made clear by Andrew Benjamin. For my current discussion, this idea would mean that the 'statue' which Yourcenar attempts to assemble with fragments of the past and supplementary parts of the present (*le plâtre, les addenda*) will not necessarily resemble anything that has existed in the past; it will not represent emperor Hadrian or his time, but it will show how that time and Yourcenar's are equally parts and manifestations of a deeper, more permanent

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<sup>65</sup> See note 53, this chapter, my emphasis here.

<sup>66</sup> Andrew Benjamin draws this conclusion after examining the totality of the 'greater language' in relation to the kabbalistic doctrine of *Tikkum*, the projected harmony of the world (Andrew Benjamin, pp. 99-100). With reference to the totality to which linguistic fragments refer, he concludes that 'The posited reality does not refer back to an archaic reality' (Andrew Benjamin, p. 101). Further down, he refers to 'the postulated and hence futural vessel' (Andrew Benjamin, p. 101).

<sup>67</sup> Andrew Benjamin, p. 102.

<sup>68</sup> Andrew Benjamin, p. 103, emphasis in the original.

reality which, as I have discussed, is rhetorical and linguistic in nature. Further down, I will argue that it is this particular vantage point, which Yourcenar has reached by acting as a ‘translator’ rather than a ‘creative writer’, that allowed her to (re)claim the authenticity of the voice of Hadrien. Prior to that, I shall attempt a comparison between Yourcenar’s concept of time and Walter Benjamin’s concept of the afterlife of the literary work. My purpose is to find out whether it is true for Benjamin, as it is for Yourcenar, that time, which undoes the literary or aesthetic object, also paradoxically creates the possibility of its authentication.

### ‘Life’ and ‘afterlife’

A step further than Paul de Man, who showed that the temporality disclosed by translation has nothing to do with the one-dimensional myth of Babel, Andrew Benjamin distinguishes between two concepts of time operative within Walter Benjamin’s theory of translation. One of them corresponds to natural languages while the other pertains to the pure or ‘primordial’ language. For his discussion he draws from Walter Benjamin’s distinction between the life and the afterlife (*leben* and *Überleben / Fortleben / Aufleben*) of the literary work in the ‘Task of the Translator’, and from a parallel distinction between information and story in the latter’s essay ‘The Storyteller’. Here is how Andrew Benjamin describes these two temporal schemes:

The first is the temporality of the instant. Information, Benjamin states, ‘lives only at the moment’. Information comes into being and passes away. It does not survive. It has no after-life. The story however is not closed. It has an after-life because there is never a final and fixed interpretation [...] It survives.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Andrew Benjamin, p. 106. The quotation within the quotation is from ‘The Storyteller’, in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, pp. 83-107.



While in 'The Task of the Translator' 'genuine' translation has already been explicitly linked with the afterlife of the literary work, Andrew Benjamin specifies that the concept of afterlife pertains to a utopian reality in which, as we saw, difference survives within sameness and totality is possible beyond essentialism. This reality presupposes that there is no original language, no original moment of creation and identity. Thus, it cannot be reduced to the domain of meaning, of artistic intention and of the autonomy of the text, which correspond, in Andrew Benjamin's distinction, to the linear temporality of the instant. This utopian reality, which is not about the triumph of reconciliation over conflict, in effect depends on fragmentation and contains it. This is the reason why the translator is charged with the task of making visible both the similarities and the discrepancies between languages. Bringing together the interrelated issues of the recognizability of the fragment and the ontology and temporality of language, Andrew Benjamin concludes with the following statement:

The belonging together of languages, the fragments of the vessel, posit that which makes them recognizable as 'broken parts of the same language'. A recognition which itself depends upon the impossibility of reducing, either temporally or ontologically, the primordial to the simple instant. In other words it depends upon maintaining the distinction between the pragmatic use of language – language instantiated – and the 'greater language'.<sup>70</sup>

Expanding on the concept of the afterlife of the literary work, Andrew Benjamin is concerned here with the delineation of a new area and a new possibility of interpretation, which he calls 'the primordial'. By stressing that the primordial is not reducible to the instant, he marks the difference between the object of interpretation and the domain of reference. In the context of Western metaphysics, the object of interpretation has been approached tautologically with reference to an original moment of identity. This is the world of fixed meanings and fulfilled intentions, which, as we know, has proved to be devoid of authenticity. Nevertheless, Andrew

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<sup>70</sup> Andrew Benjamin, p. 107.

Benjamin implies, the object of interpretation can also be approached differentially, with reference to a linguistic totality that allows for the object's fragmentariness. This possibility of interpretation is revealed through the process of translation, which can now be thought either literally, as it is by Walter Benjamin, or metaphorically, in the context of poststructural criticism.

The philosophical strength of Andrew Benjamin's argument lies not so much in questioning essentialism (this is rather the premise of his theory) as in trying to think an alternative platform for valid interpretation, based on the temporality of the story and the afterlife of the literary work. This is a bold effort and Andrew Benjamin is keen to emphasize its significance for European philosophy. He goes as far as to claim that Walter Benjamin's work 'opens up the possibility of thinking philosophy and translation [...] in terms, on the one hand of the overcoming of Platonism and on the other within the wake of the critique of the Enlightenment project.'<sup>71</sup> The quest for a valid frame of reference and its implications for contemporary criticism is of course central to my thesis. I will now turn to Yourcenar's concept of time to examine whether she, acting as a translator, has attempted to think the temporality of the literary or artistic work in terms analogous to those of Walter Benjamin and Andrew Benjamin.

Yourcenar comes close to the notion of the afterlife in 'Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur'. Let me quote here the opening paragraph of this essay:

Le jour où une statue est terminée, sa vie, en un sens, commence. La première étape est franchie, qui, par les soins du sculpteur, l'a menée du bloc à la forme humaine ; une seconde étape, au cours des siècles, à travers des alternatives d'adoration, d'admiration, d'amour, de mépris ou d'indifférence, par degrés successifs d'érosion et d'usure, le ramènera peu à peu à l'état de minéral informe auquel l'avait soustrait son sculpteur.<sup>72</sup>

The first thing to note is that Yourcenar refers to the aesthetic object, not to the literary work. But there is no reason why the notion of afterlife should not apply to

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<sup>71</sup> Andrew Benjamin, p. 107.

<sup>72</sup> *EM*, p. 312.

any form of cultural production. If every form of artistic representation has its grammar and syntax, then all artefacts have an afterlife during which, just like literary works, they become more and more expressive of a 'greater language'.<sup>73</sup>

More importantly, Yourcenar does not refer to the afterlife but, simply, to the life of the statue. Does this discrepancy involve a different form of temporality from that of the afterlife of the literary work? Walter Benjamin's text implies that it does not. In 'The Task of the Translator', he uses the terms 'continued life' and 'afterlife' of works of art to describe a very similar idea to what Yourcenar in her essay has termed 'life' - *la vie*. 'The history of the great works of art tells us about their antecedents, their realization in the age of the artist, their potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations. Where this last manifests itself, it is called fame.'<sup>74</sup> It may be still objected that, while for Yourcenar the life of a statue begins at the moment of its completion, for Benjamin the afterlife of a work of art is only experienced by future generations of viewers. In fact, Benjamin insists that only when a literary work has reached the age of its fame is its translation possible.<sup>75</sup> However, it follows from Yourcenar's formulation above ('au cours des siècles') that her concept of the life of a work of art also extends over a long time perspective. It also becomes abundantly clear in the course of her essay that she is interested in the slow or abrupt transformations through which works of art go after they have reached their age of 'fame' - to use Benjamin's term. The question therefore remains to what extent Yourcenar's concept of life coincides with Benjamin's concept of afterlife.

If Walter Benjamin distinguishes between the life and the afterlife of the work of art, Yourcenar distinguishes between the creation of the artefact and its life. There is a parallel between the two earlier stages and between the two later stages, although it

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<sup>73</sup> In 'The Task of the Translator', Walter Benjamin concedes that non-linguistic modes of representation also convey a hidden significance relevant to the expression of the nature of life itself. He writes that non-linguistic life, 'in its analogies and symbols, can draw on other ways of suggesting meaning than intensive – that is, anticipative, intimating – realization', (p. 73).

<sup>74</sup> Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', p. 72.

<sup>75</sup> Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', p. 72.

is not exact, as we just saw. To avoid a confusion of terms, especially since ‘life’ means a different thing for Benjamin and for Yourcenar, I shall approach this issue schematically.

*a) The concept of ‘life’ in Benjamin and that of the creation of the work of art in Yourcenar.*

For Walter Benjamin, the life of a work of art is the period of its ‘realization’. Andrew Benjamin links it with the temporality of the instant and with that of the information. As such, ‘life’ is characterized by closure of meaning and finitude of interpretation. It refers to a primordial moment of *ex nihilo* creation, which affirms the self-identity of life. Time emanates as a linear phenomenon from the moment of creation, always asserting the latter’s primacy. But in reality ‘life’ can only postulate that primordial moment, thus undermining the legitimacy of the authority that it draws from it.

On the other hand, for Yourcenar, the creation of the work of art follows the logic and the temporality of the symbol, as I pointed out in the previous chapter. Always necessarily a hostage to meaning, to artistic intention and interpretation, the work of art aspires to impose order over chaos and stabilize time. The temporality of the symbol is that of the linguistic sign: the eternal repetition of the same origin of signification.

Benjamin’s concept of ‘life’ as well as Yourcenar’s concept of the creation of the work of art are equally characterized by inauthentic temporality, in de Man’s sense of the term. In these concepts, time exists only as simultaneity (the eternal repetition of the same) or spatiality (a line, excluding all other dimensions). Moreover, from an ontological perspective, both Yourcenar’s and Benjamin’s concepts bear the mark of essentialism. For Benjamin, meaning is supposed to be essentially present in the ‘original’ literary work for as long as the latter is ‘alive’, that is, not susceptible to genuine translation. Similarly, in Yourcenar’s scheme, at the moment of the creation

of the work of art, an essential relationship is arbitrarily assumed to exist between the work and that which it intends to represent.

*b) The concept of 'afterlife' in Benjamin and that of the life of the work of art in Yourcenar.*

For Walter Benjamin, the afterlife of a literary work is the open-ended period when the work is less charged with semantic associations and is delivered to history as a linguistic fragment among others. It is then that a literary work becomes really translatable. Benjamin stressed that the translatability of a literary work at the age of its 'afterlife' is a manifestation of the essence of language. In his commentary, Andrew Benjamin added that essence should not be understood as identity, but as the belonging together of differences. This is not a metaphysical state that precedes the literary work, but the actual state in which it is always already thrown. If this is so, then every piece of literature, including translations, draws its authority and authenticity solely from other pieces of literature.<sup>76</sup> This, we may recall, is the function of allegory, in de Man's essay 'The Rhetoric of Temporality'. Every fragment of language exists in an authentically temporal relationship with other fragments, and meaning is constantly (re-)produced and denied within a state of differential plurality.<sup>77</sup>

Walter Benjamin's concept of afterlife thus proves to be similar to Yourcenar's concept of the life of the work of art. Indeed, in the previous chapter we saw that,

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<sup>76</sup> This is the meaning of Walter Benjamin's statement that translations of works which have reached the age of their fame 'do not so much serve the [original] work as owe their existence to it'. Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', p. 72.

<sup>77</sup> Benjamin's perception of the temporality of the symbol and the allegory is therefore not fundamentally different from de Man's. According to Menninghaus, 'for [...] Benjamin the symbol's temporal form is "momentary totality"; the temporal form of allegory is "progression in a series of moments" or, to use another term, "history"'. Winfried Menninghaus, 'Walter Benjamin's Theory of Myth', in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1988), p. 292-325, (p. 313). Menninghaus quotes from Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* (1928), published in English as *Walter Benjamin, The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London: Verso 2003).

once delivered to time and history, the work of art lives an authentically temporal existence. Only then does it begin to be free from its symbolic content and, thanks to its successive transformations in time, it lends itself to an unstable, open-ended process of interpretations. Through these transformations, the work of art progressively loses its original semantic charge and comes to represent the differential and temporal state in which it exists. Left to time, it expresses a primordial state of non-identity in the same way that the linguistic fragment expresses the ‘greater language’.

It is no surprise that Yourcenar looks no further than the word ‘life’ to name that stage in the existence of the work of art which Benjamin calls afterlife. We know that she used the term *le vécu* to describe the fleeting and sinuous aspects of existence that escape systematization and ideology.<sup>78</sup> Because *le vécu* cannot be categorized in terms of identity, it is devoid of essence. Therefore it cannot be accepted as a valid term by essentialist philosophy for which only entities that are identical to themselves actually live.<sup>79</sup> Walter Benjamin, who is certainly not an essentialist, has nevertheless followed this traditional definition when he used ‘life’ to describe only the early, more rigid stages of the existence of the literary work. Yourcenar does not make the same concession. Following a process of inversion of values, she assigns life to entities that were previously thought to be ontologically dead, such as the decaying sculpture with its constant leakage of meaning. By the same token, she discerns the

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<sup>78</sup> For instance, in Chapter 1 of my thesis, I quoted Yourcenar’s critique against ‘ce durcissement, ce dessèchement du vécu au profit d’idéologies régnantes’, in her interviews with de Rosbo (see Chapter 1, n. 4 of the present thesis).

<sup>79</sup> The priority of life over essence, and of becoming over being is, of course, a typically Nietzschean theme. While this is not the place to examine Yourcenar’s Nietzschean roots, her concept of *vie* and *le vécu* can still be linked with Nietzsche’s philosophy. If indeed, as I am arguing here, Yourcenar’s concept of ‘life’ corresponds in many respects to Benjamin’s ‘afterlife’, then it can be understood as ‘an ontology not of stasis but of becoming’, as Andrew Benjamin writes. Andrew Benjamin explicitly discusses this non-essentialist ontology in terms of the Nietzschean project of overcoming Platonism (Andrew Benjamin, pp. 105, 107).

lack of life there where previously it was thought that life was encapsulated, that is, in the freshly created work of art, with its excess of symbolic value.

This re-definition of 'life' certainly mirrors Yourcenar's heroic attempt to save the possibility of authenticity in literature, in art as well as in the terms of actual existence. However, if 'life' and 'authenticity' mark a departure from essentialist philosophy, they do not indicate that an end should be put to the quest for the essential. On the contrary, thinking in terms of life and authenticity enables Yourcenar to search for the essential not as perennial truth, but as something that is transformed, constantly translated over time. At a more abstract level, the inversion of the semantic content of life and authenticity in the context of irony allows us to redefine the essential as the possibility of translation. As Andrew Benjamin pointed out – and this is equally valid for Yourcenar as it is for Walter Benjamin – the introduction of the parameter of time through the practice of translation 'works to redefine the essential nature of the object of interpretation [...] *The essential is re-expressed in terms of translatability*'.<sup>80</sup> This means that artistic or literary representation does not, in itself, contain any degree of truth, and exists always in reference to other artefacts that precede it or follow it. But it also means that truth inheres in successive ephemeral representations, just as language inheres in individual literary works and their translations. It is this last point that makes authentic representation possible for both Walter Benjamin and Yourcenar, despite the inaccessibility of truth.

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<sup>80</sup> Andrew Benjamin, p. 90, my emphasis.

## Translation, authentication

This positive moment in the quest for authenticity accounts for Yourcenar's confidence when she attempts to identify Hadrien's voice among the many 'voices' or fragments that she collects from the past and the present. To achieve this, she begins by rejecting the injunction of approximating the historical character as he 'really' was, and of offering the resulting work as a true representation. This means that she does not set herself the impossible task of the historian, which is to depict accurately a historical era; neither does she take up the role of the historical biographer, which is to 'bring back to life' a personality. By occupying the vantage point of a translator, her aim is to bring together past representations - including those by historians, biographers, visual artists and so on - and to create a new portrait which is authenticated by the very recognizability of its heterogeneous constitutive parts. To these parts, Yourcenar adds distinct elements of her own time and mentality and creates an image that is less the true reflection of a historical person than a version of his portrait, consciously situated in the present among other similar past and future projects. The validity of this portrait depends equally on factual accuracy and the ability to refer to the 'essential', variously defined according to modern sensitivity as *le vécu*, time, 'greater language', an original difference or that which lies beyond representation.

Yourcenar's aphoristic description of her method: 'Un pied dans l'érudition, l'autre dans la magie' may be understood along these lines.<sup>81</sup> *Magie* implies the imagined absence of mediation between author and fictional character. This immediacy is only explicable with reference to that other 'essential' reality, which cannot be captured in isolated literary texts, but has to be searched intertextually. The

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<sup>81</sup> In the 'Carnets de notes de *Mémoires d'Hadrien*', *OR*, p. 526.



Yourcenarian intertext does not only consist of the corpus of original sources and historical, biographical, literary, etc. texts which are relevant thematically and linguistically to her historical fiction; it also includes the large amount of paratextual material that accompanies her work – prefaces, postfaces, carefully edited interviews, *notes*, commentaries as well as the annotations written by Yourcenar for the Pléiade edition. It is in these segments, such as the passage on *érudition* and *magie* quoted above, that we find her most direct analyses of her discursive techniques and rhetorical strategies, and they consciously work to disrupt the compactness of her realist fiction.<sup>82</sup>

It has been argued that Yourcenar's empathetic identification with her fictional or historical characters stems from her quasi-mystical ability to transcend and reconcile differences between the self and the Other on an ethical basis. By way of example, Edith Marcq, in her essay 'L'Émpathie ou une manière d'écriture yourcenarienne', claimed that Yourcenar approached her fictional characters through a psychomental process of identification. Marcq's well-researched study is structured along the ethical opposition between *le Moi* and *l'Autre*. Her ethical viewpoint accounts, in my opinion, for her paper's failure to explain how the gap between the two is actually bridged, except by evoking Yourcenar's *compassion* and an ill-defined concept of *mystique* supposedly at work in the act of narrating.<sup>83</sup> I am suggesting instead that this process of identification is neither ethical, nor of course mystical, but existential in character. Identification is rather the result of a knowing

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<sup>82</sup> It is therefore more useful to read Yourcenar's paratext as part of her work rather than *against* it. The latter approach has unfortunately been adopted in Beatrice Ness's 1991 essay 'Le succès Yourcenar: vérité et mystification'. Compelled to answer the implied dilemma of her essay's title, Ness interprets paratextual information in the traditional Genettian sense of a – dishonest (?) – attempt to manipulate readerly reception and ensure the fulfilment of authorial intention. I suggest that the answer lies rather in the narrative interplay between 'truth' and 'mystification' as legitimate devices for conveying the complexity of both the represented situations and the act of writing itself. Beatrice Ness, 'Le succès Yourcenar: vérité et mystification', in *The French Review*, Vol. 64, No 5. (Apr. 1991), pp. 794-803.

<sup>83</sup> Edith Marcq, 'L'émpathie ou une manière d'écriture yourcenarienne', in Jean Philippe Beaulieu *et al.* (eds), *Marguerite Yourcenar, Écritures de l'autre* (Quebec: XYZ, 1997), pp. 265-277.

*acceptation* of what already exists - in this case, the sources cited by Yourcenar, from the *Historia Augusta*, to Hadrian's statue at the British Museum, to Piranesi's drawings of the Villa Adriana to more recent iconography and bibliography available to her. *Acceptation*, in the sense that Yourcenar gives to the term, implies identifying and embracing the existent 'source texts' despite their incompleteness and failures, and manipulating them in such a way as to produce a historically updated 'target text' where differences continue to survive. By that token, *acceptation* is a form of translation and translation is a form of *acceptation*. They both describe a writerly technique of appropriating and re-working the past with the aim of identifying what exists authentically in time. We have seen how Yourcenar has recognized this technique in various artists and writers, from Piranesi to Thomas Mann. I have also discussed how she imagined Hadrien implementing this technique at the level of politics but also at that of subjectivity and existence. By comparing her own method of writing to translation, Yourcenar intimates that she considers herself as a member of that pantheon of artists, writers, poets and fictional characters, united in their ability to locate authenticity in the acceptance of difference.

The example which I mentioned above of the 'back translation' of an excerpt from *Mémoires d'Hadrien* is most illuminating as to how Yourcenar would decide on the authenticity of a character's voice. We saw that she realized that some of her text could not have been 'spoken' by Hadrien, especially not in Greek. In this particular example, the untranslatable text is an emotionally charged phrase consisting of seven words: '*d'un mouvement sauvage, insensé et doux*'. Properly speaking, the inclusion of these words should undermine the authenticity of the novel, insofar as the latter purports to be spoken by the emperor himself. Thus, Yourcenar writes,

Le lecteur demandera alors pourquoi je ne les fais pas enlever. Parce que l'impression, sinon l'expression, me semble authentique, et parce que je pense de l'inexactitude à peu près ce que l'empereur, d'après moi, pensait du risque, c'est-à-dire que, *toutes précautions prises*, il convient de lui faire sa part.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> EM, p. 297, emphasis by the author.

The authenticity of *Mémoires* is therefore affirmed, rather than challenged, by the inclusion of that small inaccuracy. Aware that her account can never be fully legitimate, Yourcenar reclaims part of the lost authenticity by being explicit about her text's foreignness. She does not do so within the realist text, which, like film at Benjamin's time, must be seamless in order to operate as complete distortion of reality, in the sense that I discussed above. But in her essays and paratext, Yourcenar is keen to scratch the surface and let the artificiality of her 'realist' constructions appear. In the case in question, she wants us to be aware that the seven-word phrase constitutes an addition to the original message of the novel, and that other criteria than exactitude and imitation have been employed. The foreignness of these seven words challenges the putative nativeness of the narrator's voice. This modern 'supplement' to the 'translation' of the voice of Hadrien disrupts the spatiotemporal unity of the narrative and affirms its fragmentary character. Thus, Yourcenar engages, rather than constructs, the reader's complicity by presenting the literary text as a translation of an imagined monologue which comprises a number of foreign textual elements. If the novel can no longer purport to be authentic as original representation, it can nevertheless claim to be authentic as translation. As such, it has no unique origin, it is open to interpretation and itself constitutes one possible interpretation among many. Because foreignness is an integral part of it, the novel as translation inhabits more than one place; moreover, it exists properly in time, being by its nature finite and posterior to its source text. Thus, through a process of controlled distortions that can best be paralleled with the process of translation, Yourcenar manages to create an authentic space and time for *Mémoires d'Hadrien*.

Before concluding, it must be mentioned that in the autobiographical trilogy *Le Labyrinthe du monde*, where the conventions of realism are more loosely implemented, Yourcenar occasionally interrupts the narrative and exposes her method of reconstructing the past, thus knowingly undermining the 'authenticity' of her narrative from inside the text. An example is at the beginning of the chapter 'Rue

Marais', in *Archives du Nord*, where Yourcenar admits that she does not know what kind of people the villagers around her family *château* in Flandre were. She nevertheless proceeds to visualize one of them, Françoise Leroux, 'à force de sympathie imaginative'.<sup>85</sup> As in the case of Hadrien, the universal referent that enables this identification is a reality that lies beyond representation, in which all people participate: 'Elle [i.e. Françoise Leroux] est comme nous tous dans l'inextricable et l'inéluctable'.<sup>86</sup>

Yourcenar questions her method more profoundly in *Quoi? L'éternité*, the last part of the trilogy, when she discusses the authenticity of the portrait that she creates of Jeanne, a family friend and the central female character of the book. She accepts that the biographical material about Jeanne that she managed to collect from third parties is incomplete.

Mais les propos plus ou moins incomplets ou désultatoires de tiers, les récits faits distraitemment au cours d'une promenade, ou les coudes sur une table desservie, nous laissent toujours à court : il faut boucher les trous de la tapisserie, ou rejointoyer les fragments de verre brisé.<sup>87</sup>

It is worth noticing how often the analogy with the broken or worn artefact surfaces when Yourcenar examines the issue of the validity of representation. In this case, the similarity extends to the verb 'rejointoyer' which she also uses in the example of 'back-translation' from 'Ton et langage dans le roman historique', quoted above. This analogy is always reminiscent of Benjamin's 'broken vessel'. Exactly like the act of translation, the reconstruction of the past consists in collecting fragments and

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<sup>85</sup> *EM*, p. 1050. *Archives du Nord* is the second part of Yourcenar's autobiographical trilogy *Le Labyrinthe du monde*. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Archives du Nord* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977).

<sup>86</sup> This passage appears to be inaccurately printed in the Pléiade edition (*Essais et Mémoires*, Gallimard, 1991), as follows: 'Elle est comme nous tous dans l'*extricable* et l'inéluctable' (p. 1051, my emphasis: 'extricable' instead of 'inextricable'). For this reason I chose to quote from the original Gallimard edition of *Archives du Nord* which seems to be more accurate at this point. (See previous note, p. 168).

<sup>87</sup> *EM*, p. 1238.

treating them in such a way as to produce a visibly segmented totality. The tapestry is forever worn out and the glass will always look broken.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### SPACE, TIME AND THE EXISTENTIAL SUBJECT: YOURCENAR AND HEIDEGGER

Studying Marguerite Yourcenar's work from the perspective of the contemporary critique of representation shows how thoroughly her fiction and criticism are infiltrated by a variety of specifically modern themes and preoccupations. This is by no means a surprising fact, but, as I pointed out in my introduction, it is one which has not been sufficiently stressed by critics so far. This is possibly due to Yourcenar's insistence that her narrative idiom and strongly philosophical concerns do not relate directly to any trend either in literature or in philosophy. What is more, her fiction and persona have been shrouded in an aura of universality which tends to eclipse subtler and, to my mind, more significant aspects of her work, including its topicality and historical relevance. Paradoxically, the one element that contributed more drastically to this situation is Yourcenar's resistance to the dominant perception of the self as a subject situated *opposite* the world. It can be argued that her existential consideration of the self as an irreducible entity firmly placed *in* the world should have made her wary of the temptation of universality. In this chapter I shall claim that Yourcenar's approach to subjectivity - which accounts for her refusal to commit to any particular political or ideological cause - is inextricably linked, theoretically and historically, with the existentialist tradition and more specifically with the quest for authentic selfhood in the twentieth century.

Arguably, one thing that philosophers of existence, from Kierkegaard to Heidegger, Sartre and Camus, have in common is their unwillingness to use the subject-object bipolar opposition in order to make epistemological, historiographical and ontological claims. Their rejection of the bodiless and timeless Cartesian ego – and, to a qualified extent, of its Platonic origins and Kantian and Hegelian transformations – is indirectly reflected in some major themes in Yourcenar's work. These include the non-ideality of the self, the inability of thought adequately to represent the world and the differential effect of time on any attempt to define human essence. Other themes, such as the identification with nature especially expressed in the writings about animals, the finality of physical death and the adjacent theme of bodily desire also show how Yourcenar challenged the putative autonomy of the subject to the extent that the very notion of subjectivity becomes difficult to define. The reversal of the semantics of authenticity in her work is authorized by the privileging of spatio-temporality over ideality and of the existential over the essential aspects of selfhood. This is, of course, a typically existentialist move with very different meanings for different thinkers.

My purpose in stressing the existentialist implications in Yourcenar's renegotiation of the question of subjectivity is not to categorize her under the existentialist tag. Rather, I believe that the historical and intellectual developments of the 1920's, 30's and 40's led to the prioritization of the problematic of existence in Yourcenar's fiction and criticism, as they did in the work of many other literary figures and, of course, philosophers. In the previous chapter, I suggested that the paradoxical concept of narrative and existential authenticity in Yourcenar is closely associated with her critique of cultural fragmentation in modernity - a critique which dates as early as 1929, the year of 'Diagnostic de l'Europe'. I would like now to focus on a more specific issue. Like the existentialists, Yourcenar went beyond the essentialist definition of the subject and attempted to re-think existence in terms of its spatial and temporal specificity and unrepeatability. However, this new determination

of existence is always at risk of being objectified as a new version of a hypothetical essential structure of being. The question is therefore whether such existential characteristics as temporality, locality, contingency and irreducibility, which are present in Yourcenar's work, contribute to a new definition of the supposedly eternal essence of man. In terms of the specific discussion which I am undertaking here, the question is whether the paradoxical definition of authenticity as an inescapable state of impurity and worldliness truly deconstructs the nostalgia for the authentic as it is conventionally understood, or is itself based on it. Despite Yourcenar's refined use of literature as a privileged area for the presentation of non-categorical attributes of existence, her contemplative and philosophical stance often invites this question. But above all, it is the presumption of universality in her fiction and criticism which authorizes not simply this question, but the suspicion that existence remains too coherent, too conceptual and too generic a figure in her work. By proposing to investigate this possibility, my principal aim is not to show that the problematic of subjectivity is only external to Yourcenar's *œuvre* and that deep down this problematic remains captive to some metaphysical impulse or pattern. I do not doubt her sincerity and insight when she writes that 'le « moi » est une commodité grammaticale, philosophique, psychologique', and that it is not 'la personne' in its integrity, but the individual in its inconsistency that she is interested in.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, my intention is to examine the ways in which she negotiated with the persistence of the metaphysical determination of selfhood in language and in thought, and thus to capture a moment in the history of thought as well as in the history of French and European literature.

In his 1989 book *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty is concerned with the contemporary moral and political dimensions of the clash between

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<sup>1</sup> See her interview with Claude Servan-Schreiber for *Lire*, July 1976, reprinted in Maurice Delcroix (ed.), *Marguerite Yourcenar, Portrait d'une voix* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), especially pp. 181-82 where the above quotations are to be found.



universality and contingency. He uses that opposition to bring about a sharp distinction between the public and the private spheres which is, I believe, difficult to sustain to the extent that he does. However, on the basis of that opposition, he discerns correctly a 'tension between an effort to achieve self-creation by the recognition of contingency and an effort to achieve universality by the transcendence of contingency.'<sup>2</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, this tension has been operative in the area of philosophy, in the sense that philosophers abandoned the quest for timeless truths and turned their attention to 'the sheer contingency of individual existence.'<sup>3</sup> According to Rorty, this tension has dominated philosophy since Plato, in whose writings it takes the form of 'the quarrel between philosophy and poetry':

Post-Nietzschean philosophers like Wittgenstein and Heidegger write philosophy in order to exhibit the universality and necessity of the individual and the contingent. Both philosophers became caught up in the quarrel between philosophy and poetry which Plato began, and both ended by trying to work out honorable terms on which philosophy might surrender to poetry.<sup>4</sup>

Here Rorty sums up the still ongoing shift from philosophy to literature, and points out the paradox of an 'un-philosophical' philosophy that seeks to establish the universality of the contingent.

Rorty elaborates this paradox further in a separate chapter of his book where he compares Heidegger's effort to inaugurate a non-conceptual way of philosophizing to Proust's use of narrative to explore concepts and terms which do not lay claim to universal validity. He concludes that 'Heidegger failed where Proust succeeded', because Proust was under no illusion that the terms which he used – that is, names such as 'Guermites', 'Combray', 'Gilberte' - had any autonomous, universal value.<sup>5</sup> Heidegger, on the other hand, was 'quite wrong in thinking that there could be a universal poem – something which combined the best features of philosophy and

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Rorty, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Rorty, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> Rorty, p. 118.

poetry, something which lay beyond both metaphysics and ironism'.<sup>6</sup> This criticism conveys in broad terms the aporetic aspects of the relationship between literature and philosophy and takes into account the continuous temptation to sublimate contingent experiences and meanings. In this chapter I shall refine this criticism with especial reference to Heidegger and his elaboration of a form of subjectivity with universal pretensions, the Dasein. It is in the wider context of this discussion that a comparison between Yourcenar and Heidegger becomes possible. In their different capacities, they approached literature and philosophy from opposite ends, they were both determined to let their work be infiltrated by disciplines which were not homologous with their own – speculative thought, for Yourcenar; poetry, for Heidegger –, and yet they reached some surprisingly compatible conclusions, as I shall attempt to show.

## Space and the existential subject

In *Being and Time*, the most comprehensive account of Heidegger's early philosophy, the element of contingency is discussed through the existential analytic of Dasein. Thoroughly subverting the traditional Cartesian notion of subjectivity, Dasein is principally distinguished from that notion by the fact that it is not an objectively present entity. Heidegger's criticism of the Cartesian subject is articulated in terms of his distinction between the ontological and the various ontic enquiries into existence. He writes that Descartes 'investigates the "*cogitare*" of the "*ego*", at least within certain limits. On the other hand, he leaves the "*sum*" completely undiscussed, even though it is regarded as no less primordial than the *cogito*'. Against the failure on the part of Descartes to investigate existence as such, Heidegger then formulates his task as follows:

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<sup>6</sup> Rorty, p. 119.

One of our first tasks will be to prove that if we posit an 'I' or subject as such that is proximally given, we shall completely miss the phenomenal content of Dasein. *Ontologically*, every idea of a 'subject' [...] still posits the *subjectum* (*υποκείμενον*) along with it, no matter how vigorous one's ontical protestations against the 'soul substance' or the 'reification of consciousness'.<sup>7</sup>

Heidegger is keen to distinguish between the ontological approach to existence and the various ontic approaches to 'subjectivity', such as the Cartesian ego or 'soul substance', and the critique of the 'reification of consciousness' in sociology.<sup>8</sup> This distinction is central to *Being and Time* and it is based on what Heidegger called the ontological difference, that is, the difference between Being and beings. The importance of the prioritization by Heidegger of Being over beings is that it opens up a space for the study of existence not as a timeless type, but as absolute individuality. Heidegger thus wishes to equip philosophy with a new tool on the basis of which universally valid statements can be made on contingent states and situations in which man can be found.

Being, as the basic theme of philosophy, is no class or genus of entities; yet it pertains to every entity. Its 'universality' is to be sought higher up. Being and the structure of Being lie beyond every entity and every possible character which an entity may possess. *Being is the transcendens pure and simple*. And the transcendence of Dasein's being is distinctive in that it implies the possibility and the necessity of the most radical *individuation*.<sup>9</sup>

By the doubly emphasized term *transcendens* Heidegger implies that Being transcends rationalist, empiricist and materialist categorizations. Being is transcendental in that it is the condition for the possibility of any classification of beings and the condition for the existence of these beings.<sup>10</sup> In this way, Heidegger

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), pp. 71 and 72, emphasis by the author.

<sup>8</sup> Lucien Goldmann has proposed that Heidegger's use of the phrase 'reification of consciousness' is borrowed directly from Lukàcs, to whose socio-philosophy, according to Goldmann, *Being and Time* responds. See Lucien Goldmann, *Lukàcs et Heidegger* (Paris: Denoël, 1973), especially pp. 72-73: 'Sans nommer Lukàcs, [Heidegger] critique son analyse de la réification en nous disant qu'elle a un statut socio-historique qui a besoin d'être fondé ontologiquement' (p. 73).

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 62, emphasis by the author.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. O. C. Thomas, 'Transcendens is Heidegger's term for the scholastic *transcendia* or universally applicable characters', 'Being and Some Theologians', *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 70, No. 1/2. (Jan. - Apr., 1977), pp. 137-160, (p. 149).

stresses the paradox of the particular Being of Dasein whose universal attribute is spatio-temporal uniqueness. In the first sections of Part I of *Being and Time*, Heidegger is mostly concerned with the spatial parameters of Dasein's structure, that is, with Dasein's Being-in-the-world, before tackling the issue of Dasein's temporality. I shall first focus on selected aspects of this analysis, with a view to drawing specific parallels between it and Yourcenar's critique of subjectivity and conceptual thinking.

Being-in-the-world is, according to Heidegger, one of the most basic states of Being and it signifies simply the fact that no entity is encountered on its own, but it always exists in a context. Beings, including human beings, do not possess an essence that exists autonomously before coming into contact with other entities. Heidegger's discussion of the way in which Dasein exists alongside, and gets to know, other beings is of particular importance here, as it reflects to a certain extent Yourcenar's critique of conceptuality. Heidegger is wary of classical epistemology which is based on the idea of truth as equation. He regrets the 'procedure [...] of setting up knowing as a "relation between subject and Object" – a procedure in which there is as much "truth" as vacuity'.<sup>11</sup> It is tempting already to compare this statement with the following passage from *Mémoires d'Hadrien*:

Sur bien des points, d'ailleurs, la pensée de nos philosophes me semblait elle aussi bornée, confuse, ou stérile. Les trois quarts de nos exercices intellectuels ne sont plus que broderies sur le vide ; je me demandais si cette vacuité croissante était due à un abaissement de l'intelligence ou à un déclin du caractère.<sup>12</sup>

In both Yourcenar's and Heidegger's statements, there is awareness that the quest for truth is predicated upon abstract terms ('subject', 'Object', 'broderies sur le vide') with no foundation in the world, thus leaving the questioning being, Dasein, in an emotional and intellectual state of vacuity. This basic critique of the spatio-temporal

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<sup>11</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> *OR*, p. 458.

vacuum in which philosophical research is generally conducted is further elaborated not only by Heidegger but also by Yourcenar, as we shall see further on.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger develops a deconstruction of the subject and the object of philosophy before establishing the relationship between Dasein and the world on his own terms. Firstly, he is determined to avoid the reductive representation of the enquiring self as a pure, contemplative, disembodied being. His way of doing so is to consider Dasein as it is usually to be found, namely, Heidegger thinks, in the state of 'average everydayness'. Dasein is thus not abstracted as a scientific, psychological, moral, etc., subject, nor is it extracted from life and isolated as a phenomenological subject *à la* Husserl. It is when Dasein is examined in this casual state that any ontological interpretation may claim any validity, as Heidegger makes clear:

We must [...] choose such a way of access and such kind of interpretation that this entity can show itself in itself and from itself [...]. And this means that [Dasein] has to be shown as it is *proximally and for the most part* – in its average *everydayness*.<sup>13</sup>

Secondly, with regard to Dasein's Being-in-the-world, Heidegger explains that it is characterised by concern for all beings including itself. 'Concern' designates an *a priori* interest in the world, a fundamental fascination with it, which goes beyond the subject-object antithesis.<sup>14</sup> In its usual mode of 'average everydayness', Dasein is not concerned with other entities by reaching out of itself towards 'objects' that exist autonomously. Neither does getting to know something involve 'a process of returning with one's booty to the "cabinet" of consciousness after one has gone out and grasped it'.<sup>15</sup> Heidegger suggests that the world is first disclosed to us through a non-aggressive and non-possessive kind of concern, which is activated every time we use something for practical purposes. Such practical relationship with entities in the

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<sup>13</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 37-38, emphasis by the author.

<sup>14</sup> 'Being-in-the-world, as concern, is *fascinated by* the world with which it is concerned.' Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 88, emphasis by the author.

<sup>15</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 89.

world – entities that are used as ‘tools’ or, as the term *Zeug* was translated, as ‘equipment’ - is emphatically non-theoretical. Theory, with its etymological root in the Greek *horān*, to see, posits a distance between the spectator and the item which is looked at, by dint of which this item is thematized and objectified. On the contrary, equipment used in Dasein’s ‘average everyday’ dealings is not *seen*, in the strong sense of it being observed by Dasein. The type of sight most usually employed by Dasein is called by Heidegger ‘circumspection’ and the type of Being which is immediately available to Dasein in this way is called readiness-to-hand. Heidegger draws a sharp line between, on the one hand, centuries of philosophical reductionism and abstract speculation, and on the other, his own phenomenology which is contaminated, as it were, by authentic existence in the world: ‘If we look at Things just “theoretically”, we can get along without understanding readiness-to-hand.’<sup>16</sup>

Then, Heidegger explains further:

The ready-to-hand is not grasped theoretically at all, nor is it itself the sort of thing that circumspection takes proximally as a circumspective theme. The peculiarity of what is proximally ready-to-hand is that, in its readiness-to-hand, it must, as it were, withdraw [zurückzuziehen] in order to be ready-to-hand quite authentically.<sup>17</sup>

Entities which are ready-to-hand withdraw from Dasein’s interpretative gaze. They are not thematically present while Dasein is using, manipulating or producing them. It is only when immediate familiarity with equipment ready-to-hand is interrupted - because of an accident, loss and so on – that a subsequent intentional act of inspection transforms it into something which is present-at-hand, that is, of pure theoretical interest (*Being and Time*, §16.) While Heidegger is keen to emphasize that presence-at-hand is not a less authentic state of Being, he is adamant that readiness-to-hand is the primary mode in which Dasein finds itself in its dealing with entities in the world. He stresses that ‘readiness-to-hand is the way in which entities

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<sup>16</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 98.

<sup>17</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 99.

as they are “in themselves” are defined ontologico-categorially’.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Dasein is practically engaged in a non-explicit, non-representational relationship with other entities. In examining and getting to understand these entities ‘in themselves’, Dasein does not conceptualize them by stripping them from the relational context in which they are ordinarily encountered.

This is clearly not just a methodological point to be taken on board in epistemological research. Heidegger’s idea of the embeddedness of beings in real environments problematized the relationship between existence and space in European philosophy. It marked a shift of focus away from objectified three-dimensional space, but also from Husserl’s phenomenal space - perceived by an ego that suspends other sensory data -, and towards a perception of dynamic existential space.<sup>19</sup> While it is beyond the present context to pursue this analysis any further, it must be mentioned that Heidegger’s re-working of the relationship between subject and space anticipated his later turn from philosophy to poetry and contributed to his questioning of the space that is traditionally allocated to philosophy in relation to literature.

In her work, Yourcenar investigated the relationship between subjectivity and space less systematically but along very similar lines. As early as in 1932, the difference between immediate contact with things and the theoretical gaze towards them is illustrated perfectly in a passage of her monograph on Pindar, which describes the trip that the Greek poet made as a young man from his native Boeotia to Athens to further his education. Yourcenar writes about the sober Attican landscape as it is revealed to Pindar, and takes the opportunity to remind us of the archaic

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<sup>18</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 101.

<sup>19</sup> The notion of existential space is further developed in *Being and Time* and in Heidegger’s later writings. See especially *Being and Time* §24, and Heidegger’s essays ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’ and ‘The Thing’, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial, 1975).

understanding of beauty as a sufficient and necessary relationship between man and physical environment.

Ce n'était plus la grasse plaine béotienne ni les massifs du Cithéron où tournait la ronde échevelée des ménades ; une terre plus maigre, aux montagnes sèches, qui n'accorde aux hommes que le nécessaire, et leur donne par sa sobriété la leçon du parfait. Les contemporains de Pindare ne cherchaient pas comme nous à comprendre ces paysages ; ils y vivaient ; ils en vivaient.<sup>20</sup>

This passage refers to a non-cognitive and non-aesthetic understanding of beauty, in decidedly positive terms. The accent here is on the signification of 'le parfait.' According to Yourcenar, Greeks did not define perfection through a conscious process of perception and appreciation. 'Le parfait' qualifies their economy, ecology, and practical dealing with the world. This economy pertains to a more archaic state of being for which the world was man's functional extension. To put Yourcenar's argument in specifically Heideggerian terms, Greeks at the time of Pindar had a relationship of readiness-to-hand with their environment; we, on the other hand, have lost this relationship of vital necessity and try to compensate for this loss through our efforts to comprehend the world as something present-at-hand. The archaic simplicity is underlined by Yourcenar further down in the same paragraph, when she draws attention to 'cette extrême simplicité d'impression, qu'il ne faut jamais oublier quand il s'agit des anciens Hellènes'.<sup>21</sup> Yourcenar refers here to the original admiration which she believes that the Greeks felt for basic things, such as Pentelic marble and olive trees, a feeling that is reminiscent of Dasein's fundamental fascination with the world. This admiration having been replaced in our times by comprehension, we tend now to dwell not in a world of equipment, but in a world of concepts.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> EM, p. 1452. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Pindare* (Paris: Gallimard, 1932).

<sup>21</sup> EM, p. 1452.

<sup>22</sup> Yourcenar's point about pre-classical innocence is certainly worth taking seriously, although there is a risk of falling into cliché when one argues, as she appears to do in *Pindare*, that archaic cultures were somehow simpler than ours. There is a more serious risk of falling into metaphysical speculation in the assumption that man's identification with the world was, or could be, a possibility actualized historically by entire civilizations. Yourcenar soon became aware of the precariousness of her statements in *Pindare*, a book which she later described as 'ce très médiocre ouvrage de jeunesse', where 'la peinture de la Grèce y reste extérieure et superficielle' (Letter to Simon Sautier, 8 October



Yourcenar's criticism of the tendency to conceptualize our relationship with the world parallels to some extent Heidegger's idea of readiness-to-hand as the primary mode in which Being is revealed to Dasein. In chapter 2 especially, I showed how the critique of conceptuality becomes in Yourcenar a critique of spatiality, in the sense that the suppression of time, for instance in art, is precisely what authorizes the projection of reality onto an immobilized mental space. Clearly, no account of man's understanding relationship with the world in the work of Yourcenar is valid without reference to this relationship's temporal dimension. I shall return to this discussion shortly. Before that, further instances should be mentioned of the way that Heidegger's distinction between the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand appears in Yourcenar's work.

A prime example comes in the lecture 'André Gide Revisited' which Yourcenar delivered in 1970 at Smith College in Massachusetts for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Gide's birth. Discussing Gide's *Les Nourritures terrestres*, a novel which 'changeait le sens et le goût de la vie', Yourcenar develops the antithesis between abstraction and life:

*Le Nourritures terrestres* nous montrent un personnage jouissant des formes du monde, des couleurs du monde, des aventures, des différents aspects, des différentes possibilités variées de la vie.

Et il y a là, il y avait là dans une littérature qui [...] tend parfois un peu, à chaque génération, à s'éloigner de la vie pour s'enfermer dans des concepts, dans une sorte d'abstraction presque idéologique, et dans des problèmes de pure forme, il y avait là le désir passionné de contact avec la vie qui était, de nouveau, pour d'innombrables jeunes gens en train de faire sagement leurs universités, bouleversant.<sup>23</sup>

The difference between readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand is here expressed in terms of the opposition between *jouissance des formes du monde* and *problèmes de pure forme*. The issue of authentic spatiality is addressed negatively, through a

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1970, in *Lettres à ses amis et quelques autres*, pp. 461-478, pp. 464-65). Nonetheless, her biographer Josyane Savigneau points out that *Pindare* contains 'beaucoup [...] de traces de ce qui sera l'univers de Marguerite Yourcenar, sa pensée, et même son style'. In Josyane Savigneau, *Marguerite Yourcenar: L'Invention d'une vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), p. 100.

<sup>23</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar, 'André Gide Revisited', in *Cahiers André Gide* 3, Le Centenaire (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp. 21-44, p. 30.

critique of distance, abstraction and ideology. Every generation, writes Yourcenar, tends to distance itself from life. This distance is what allows for conceptual representation of forms, colours, aspects of life, and so on. *Les Nourritures terrestres*, her argument goes, is a book about the possibility of ecstatic union with the world – a book which deeply moved young readers as it revealed precisely the distance that separated them from a more inclusive state of being. Yourcenar implies that an authentic relationship with the world can indeed be reclaimed within the context of representation and conceptualization. To that extend, her argument parallels Heidegger's theory that readiness-to-hand is an authentic possibility for Dasein within the dominant metaphysics of presence-at-hand.

I have already discussed other aspects of Yourcenar's critique of conceptuality, particularly during my examination of 'Animula vagula blandula' in Chapter 1. As in her essay on André Gide, Yourcenar's approach is centred, negatively, on the lure and the limits of ideology and systematic thought, without offering a strong positive paradigm of the way our non-cognitive, non-representational relationship with Being may be revealed to us. This is certainly not surprising, for Yourcenar is as overwhelmed by the impasse of representation as any modernist writer. The mental and psychological space of her novels is overdetermined by presence-at-hand. To use her own words from the last quotation above, Yourcenar is also inescapably 'enfermée dans des concepts'. However, she came closer to a positive definition of that non-theoretical immediacy implied by readiness-to-hand in her later novels, *L'Œuvre au noir* and, especially, *Un homme obscur*. Both Zénon, on the way to his prison cell, and Nathanaël, sailing to his final insular abode, carry out an experiment which could boldly be described as the fictional equivalent of phenomenological reduction: progressively, they exclude chronological and even historical time in order to sink into space and become one with it. Indeed, time is excluded already in the first lines of the final section of *Un homme obscur*, where Nathanaël's figure slowly pales away into the darkness of the island before he dies:

Alors, le temps cessa d'exister. C'était comme si on avait effacé les chiffres d'un cadran, et le cadran lui-même palissait comme la lune au ciel en plein jour. Sans horloge (celle de la maisonnette ne fonctionnait plus), sans montre (il n'en avait jamais possédé), sans calendrier des bergers pendu au mur, le temps passait comme l'éclair ou durait toujours.<sup>24</sup>

What is eliminated here is not time as such, but the objectivity of time. Time as a calculable quantity gives its place to existential time. With the cessation of calendar time, Nathanaël is able to free himself from the tyranny of the concept and, in an ecstatic union with the world, to transcend all 'ontic' categories, including age, gender and even the quality of being human. As Nadia Harris writes in her essay 'Représentations de l'Autre dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar', 'L'espace insulaire devient le lieu privilégié où cet émigré de la culture [i.e. Nathanaël] fait l'expérience du lien profond qui l'unit au monde'.<sup>25</sup> She goes on to quote this passage from *Un homme obscur*:

Même les âges, les sexes, et jusqu'aux espèces, lui paraissaient plus proches qu'on ne croit les uns des autres : enfant ou vieillard, homme ou femme, animal ou bipède qui parle et travaille de ses mains, tous communiaient dans l'infortune et la douceur d'exister.<sup>26</sup>

In her essay, Harris has explicitly in mind Levinas's idea of radical exteriority. This makes her sensitive to the way Yourcenar avoids the process of conceptual appropriation of otherness in *Un homme obscur*. Harris draws our attention to Nathanaël's final act of liberation, the burning of the Bible - the last book which he has with him in the island. The destruction of the Bible has nothing symbolic for Nathanaël, in whose hands the book becomes a piece of equipment, in the Heideggerian sense of the word: 'une Bible qu'il brûla par poignées un jour où le poêle prenait mal.'<sup>27</sup> Nathanaël is then free to dedicate himself fully to the study of the world around him: 'il pensait en tout cas qu'il eût été mal de ne pas s'absorber

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<sup>24</sup> OR, p. 1032.

<sup>25</sup> Nadia Harris, 'Représentations de l'Autre dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar', in Jean-Philippe Beaulieu, *et al.* (eds), *Marguerite Yourcenar, Écritures de l'autre* (Quebec: XYZ, 1997), pp. 45-52, p. 51.

<sup>26</sup> OR, p. 1036.

<sup>27</sup> OR, p. 1034.

exclusivement dans la lecture du monde.’<sup>28</sup> But the meaning of the destruction of the Bible is underlined still further by Yourcenar. In so far as the concept of ‘books’ is used at this part of the novel to signify abstraction and reductive representation, it is at the antipodes of life. She writes: ‘Lire les livres, comme lamper de l’eau-de-vie, eût été une manière de s’étourdir *pour ne pas être là*.’<sup>29</sup> This is an extraordinary statement to which the expression ‘pour ne pas être là’ adds a specific ontological dimension. In the context of the narrative, ‘être là’ refers to the island where Nathanaël has come to be united with nature and finish his life. Therefore, from an ontological perspective, ‘être là’ signifies being there where one belongs, immersed in one’s facticity, ‘absorbed exclusively’ (as Yourcenar writes) by the world. This is what *Da-sein* is. The verbal noun *être-là* is of course an established translation of *Dasein*, emphasizing the worldliness of being-there. We may interpret the above phrase from *Un homme obscur* as follows: ‘conceptual appropriation of the world is but a way of intoxicating oneself as a substitute for not being where one belongs authentically.’ Here, Yourcenar reaches exactly the same point as Heidegger, when he discusses conceptual representation (“‘understanding” everything’, ‘all possibilities of explanation’, ‘characterologies’, ‘typologies’) as an attempt by *Dasein* to ‘tranquillize’ itself – an attempt that ends in inauthenticity and alienation:

When *Dasein*, tranquillized, and ‘understanding’ everything, thus compares itself with everything, it drifts along towards an alienation [Entfremdung] in which its ownmost potentiality-for-Being is hidden from it. Falling Being-in-the-world is not only tempting and tranquillizing; it is at the same time *alienating*.<sup>30</sup>

The passage of *Un homme obscur* which I discussed above is followed by a comment on Nathanaël’s disintegrating body and on the anticipation of death. ‘Plus ses sensations corporelles devenaient pénibles, plus il lui semblait nécessaire, à force d’attention, d’essayer plutôt de suivre, sinon de comprendre, ce qui se faisait ou se

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<sup>28</sup> OR, p. 1034-35

<sup>29</sup> OR, p. 1035, my emphasis

<sup>30</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 222.

défaisait en lui.’<sup>31</sup> Again, it is worth noticing how Yourcenar arrives from a different direction at the Heideggerian idea that ontological awareness is not a question of cognition but one of attention and heeding. The difference between *comprendre* and *suivre* is the same as that between conceptualization of the world and concentration on the world - in this case, one’s body - in such a way as to let the world reveal itself to the questioning self. In contrast to the theoretical attitude implicit in *comprendre*, there is purely a technique involved in the process of *suivre*, which, in the case of Nathanaël, consists in paying close attention to physical pain.

For Hadrien, on the other hand, this technique entails a necessary political dimension. It provides for two forms of active collaboration, *avec la terre* and *avec le temps*, which are translated into the dual enterprise of ‘construire’ and ‘re-construire’ (*OR*, pp. 384 ff.). As it is explained through the examples of *collaboration* provided in *Mémoires d’Hadrien*, and as I stressed in Chapter 2, this way of understanding political activity originates in Hadrien’s conviction that people belong to concrete spatiotemporal (and therefore historical) contexts. Yourcenar suggests that Hadrien’s political planning is inspired by a strong sense of worldliness centred on humanity. For that reason, it is interesting to study Hadrien’s politics in relation to Heidegger’s existential analysis. This will be one of my goals in the next chapter. Prior to that, I shall try to establish a relationship between Yourcenar’s and Heidegger’s perceptions of time.

## Time and the existential subject

The centrality of the agency of time in both Heidegger and Yourcenar hardly needs emphasizing. Time is the element on which both thinkers’ meditation on existence,

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<sup>31</sup> *OR*, p. 1035.

their respective theories of representation and their philosophies of history are anchored. More fundamentally, time is for both the inherently differential phenomenon which makes it possible to think existence at all, to introduce the question of authenticity and to explain the bearing of history on the present.

There are certainly deep-seated differences in the way Yourcenar and Heidegger think time. For instance, Heidegger does not deal systematically with cosmic or astronomical time, which plays an important role in Yourcenar's idea of the fundamental order of things, their objective *durée*. Nonetheless there are striking similarities between them as regards the way they consider existential and historical time and the way these two relate to each other. Further, by thematizing time in their work, they both exemplify the shift of focus in European thought from essence to existence. With equal urgency, they move from the quest for static truth to the possibility of dynamic authenticity, by temporalizing the site of the self with a view to placing the latter firmly within the world. We just saw how pressingly the temporal question emerged at every turn in the above discussion of Yourcenar's critique of spatiality. Time is the element which constantly disturbs the possibility of spatial order, but which also, through destruction and irony, discloses the constitutive worldliness of the self. By complicating the act of representation, while being unrepresentable itself, time defines the 'thereness' of Being.

These arguments are valid for both Heidegger and Yourcenar, but it is in *Being and Time* that they aspire to universal meaning as part of the analysis of the ecstatic structure of Dasein. Heidegger's main point is that time is not an entity or a context in which things occur, but a process fuelled by Dasein itself in the course of which Dasein projects itself onto its unique possibilities. This means that the human being, whether 'authentic' or 'inauthentic', is never equal to itself. It does not arise from itself but from its Being towards which it tends. Dasein is always ahead of itself striving to become explicitly the Being-in-the-world which it originally is. Existence is therefore differential, and this difference - in effect the difference between Being

and beings - manifests itself dynamically as a tension, a projection towards 'something'. This tension is time. Levinas summarizes this point neatly: 'On pourrait dire que le temps c'est l'élan par lequel l'homme s'inscrit dans l'être, par lequel il l'assume.'<sup>32</sup> As this dynamic absence, time makes it possible for man to assume his Being, that is, to understand non-conceptually himself as a finite being in the world. Dasein's return to itself is actualized through the phenomena of the future, the present and the past, which Heidegger calls 'ecstases'. While the traditional triadic structure of temporality is retained, the ecstases do not designate ordinary perceptions of objective or psychological time. Heidegger insists on the differential and thereby non-essential character of temporality:

*Temporality is the primordial 'outside-of-itself' in and for itself. We therefore call the phenomena of the future, the character of having been, and the Present, the 'ecstases' of temporality. Temporality is not, prior to this, an entity which first emerges from itself; its essence is a process of temporalizing in the unity of the ecstases.'*<sup>33</sup>

There are two aspects of this definition that are directly relevant to my argument on Yourcenar. Firstly, the unity of the three ecstases of time relates to Yourcenar's discovery of a unifying order which emerges through the disorder of man's existential predicament. Secondly, and following from the previous point, the Heideggerian theme of the unity of primordial time can be linked to the prevalence, in Yourcenar, of *acceptation* over *révolte*. I shall summarize Heidegger's thesis on the unity of the ecstases, before I attempt to associate it with Yourcenar's arguments on order and acceptance.

If time has always been felt as a continuum of difference, Heidegger transferred the site of the difference from the objective world to Being, or rather, to Being-in-the-world. The unity of ecstatic time is possible because Dasein is not a stable essence in a changing world but is itself temporal. In this way, in its unity, ecstatic

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<sup>32</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1994), p. 88.

<sup>33</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 377, emphasis by the author.

time remains plural. The three dimensions of Dasein's time, futurity, pastness and presence, assume their meaning only in relation to each other and they all point to Dasein's instability and dislocation.

- Futurity is not a quality assigned to events towards which Dasein is supposed to lead, but the coming of Dasein towards its own possibilities. The future is produced by the self in resolute anticipation of its own death. Heidegger writes: 'We have in view the coming in which Dasein, in its ownmost potentiality-for-Being, comes toward itself. Anticipation makes Dasein *authentically* futural.'<sup>34</sup> Dasein is always already outside itself. It *is* not, but it *ex-sists*.<sup>35</sup> Existence is this perpetual tension between Dasein and its 'ownmost potentiality' which is nothingness, literally death.<sup>36</sup>

- Similarly, the past is defined non-objectively as an attribute of the self, rather than as something anterior to the present. In seeking to retrieve itself from the past, Dasein looks in itself. As Dasein oscillates between its 'thrownness' in the world and its future fulfilment, its past is defined as this thrownness, which involves inauthenticity as well as the desire for authenticity. Heidegger writes that 'Dasein never 'finds itself' except as a thrown Fact'.<sup>37</sup>

- Finally, for Heidegger, the present is not the now-moment of ordinary time. The present is also 'ecstatic', because Dasein steps beyond itself and defines itself in relation to other entities. Heidegger calls this motion 'Falling' into the everydayness, and considers that it entails an original moment of inauthenticity. From there, Dasein must spring forward into authentic futurity.

Undoubtedly, Heidegger's most enduring insight into time is the determination of temporality as part of man's constitution, prior to any segmentation between

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<sup>34</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 373, emphasis by the author.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Inwood points out that 'Heidegger often writes *Ex-sistenz* or *Ek-sistenz* to stress "stepping forth."' In Michael Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary* (London: Blackwell, 1999), p. 60.

<sup>36</sup> It is tempting to add that this perception of death and futurity, resolution and anticipation, is perfectly illustrated in one of Yourcenar's plays, *Qui n'a pas son Minotaure ?*. Just before Thésée enters the labyrinth to face the Minotaure, he says: 'Je marcherai vers la mort doucement engagé dans l'avenir'. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Théâtre*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), II, p. 205.

<sup>37</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 376.



subjective and objective time. The human being emerges from this discussion as a solitary figure, free to assume the contingency of his or her existence. The unity of time reflects the unity of Heidegger's analysis of temporality which is made possible by the horizon of individual death. The prospect of nothingness frustrates in advance any ambition to understand oneself as eternal essence living in the present. This is why Heidegger insists that man is not settled in the hypothetical identity of eternal present but lives differentially, ecstatically, in a future which is his own. As Paul Ricœur has pointed out, 'Cette différenciation est intrinsèquement impliquée par la temporalisation, en tant que celle-ci est un procès qui rassemble en dispersant. Le passage du futur au passé et au présent est à la fois unification et diversification'.<sup>38</sup>

This unity that comprises difference defines man's factual situation, thus rounding up and universalizing contingency. This does not mean that there is a pattern underlying contingent phenomena – the only 'pattern' being finiteness –, but that contingency is a structural part of existence. It means that we are thrown in a world where scientific principles, ethical values and so on change constantly and where different manifestations of nature and history are ultimately unpredictable. What persists is thrownness, a difference which affects all beings but to which only the human being is privy. Whether or not Heidegger's account of temporality manages to overturn metaphysics, it certainly overturns the terms of the question of Being. Heidegger redefines the task of philosophy as the effort to record the tensions which keep Being away from itself in a world determined by finiteness.

Let me now return to the work of Yourcenar to see how aspects of the problematic of time as discussed above can be related to her thinking of contingency and the worldliness of existence. Certainly, Yourcenar's work is no illustration of any given version of existentialism. Rather, it is concerned in an original way with the

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<sup>38</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit*, tome III, *Le temps raconté* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), p. 130.

stakes involved in the modern determination of selfhood, and represents at the level of narrative man's struggle to come to terms with the implications of difference.

In 'Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur', Yourcenar shows how time acquires various meanings depending on its relationship with the act of (aesthetic) representation. She argues that time is neither the context in which representation takes place nor simply the force against which representation is set. Time is rather the 'sculpteur', the agent of representation which ultimately fulfils artistic intention in the sense that the final product, the ruin, is as fragmented as its 'creator'. In the ontic world, the artist's intention expresses itself as the drive for identity, but from the existential perspective which Yourcenar adopts, the intention is to repeat difference and fragmentation. Following a Heideggerian logic, we may therefore suggest that the artist's intention is indeed a tension between identity and difference. Artistic intention is a movement of stepping ahead of oneself toward authentic futurity, which is the definition of ecstatic time.

In the previous chapter I also referred to the question of temporality in terms of the life (or 'afterlife') of the aesthetic/literary artefact. With reference to Walter Benjamin, time was understood metaphorically as a relation between linguistic fragments, especially literary works and their translations. It was recognized that this temporality depended on a tension of a more fundamental order, that between languages of the world and 'pure language' as a unified site of differential plurality. Although in that discussion there was no immediate reference to existentiality, literary works were discussed in terms of their life, as they pass from a state of originality to one of translatability. They, too, were considered to be 'thrown' into factual world and to exist in a tension between two types of temporality, the temporality of the 'instant' and that of the 'primordial'. Under the light of the present discussion, these temporalities correspond, to a certain extent, to ordinary and ecstatic temporality respectively. Just as Dasein exists in a state of permanent tension in relation to Being, so literary fragments exist in a state of tension in relationship to

'pure language'.<sup>39</sup> As I showed, Yourcenar took this difference implicitly into account. She situated *Mémoires d'Hadrien* within the tension between essentialism and translatability by defining her novel as a translation. She embraced and demonstrated the difference between, on the one hand, essentialism and the temporality of the instant, and on the other, translatability and the temporality of the primordial. By considering her novel as a fragment in a series of fragments (in Benjamin's and de Man's sense), she temporalized and thus authenticated it in the same sense that Dasein claims an authentic relationship with Being by temporalizing itself.

In addition to the metaphor of translation, Yourcenar uses other analogies in her fiction to highlight the tension between the ordinary time of presence and the primordial time of existence. In chapter 1 I showed how this tension is expressed in *Mémoires* as Hadrien's nostalgia for order and desire for representation (chapter 'Animula vagula blandula'). Hadrien is frustrated by the fact that no system of ideas has eternal value, a state of affairs which is evident to him from his privileged standpoint as a manipulator of symbols. I would like to focus on a point of the novel where this key problem seems to Hadrien to be resolved, if only for a moment.

Structurally, this point corresponds exactly to the centre of the novel and represents the moment of Hadrien's absolute personal and political fulfilment.<sup>40</sup> Two themes are used simultaneously to bring together the issues of contingency, phenomenal time and death. The first is that of the Eleusinian Mysteries, to which Hadrien was initiated, and about which he says: 'Ces grands rites ne font que symboliser les événements de la vie humaine'.<sup>41</sup> The second theme is the study of the

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<sup>39</sup> I am aware of the differences between Heidegger's and Benjamin's accounts of temporality. Notably, as Caygill writes: 'It is the distinction between fulfilment *in* historical time and the fulfilment *of* historical time which marks the difference between Heidegger and Benjamin (Caygill, p. 10). At this point, I am interested in Yourcenar's perception of time not as presence, but as difference and tension – a perception that, I believe, Benjamin and Heidegger share.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *Les Yeux ouverts*, p. 101, where Yourcenar discusses the structure of *Mémoires d'Hadrien* as 'une espèce de construction pyramidale'.

<sup>41</sup> *OR*, p. 400.

sky, in the forms of astrology, ‘cette étrange réfraction de l’humain sur la voûte stellaire’, and astronomy.<sup>42</sup> In the following passage, Hadrien considers astronomy as an equally legitimate method of representation of humanity as the rituals of Eleusis:

l’esprit humain révélait ici sa participation à l’univers par l’établissement d’exactes théorèmes comme à Éleusis par des cris rituels et des danses. L’homme qui contemple et les astres contemplés roulaient inévitablement vers leur fin, marquée quelque part au ciel. Mais chaque moment de cette chute était un temps d’arrêt, un repère, un segment d’une courbe aussi solide qu’une chaîne d’or. Chaque glissement nous ramenait à ce point qui, parce que par hasard nous y sommes trouvés, nous paraît un centre.<sup>43</sup>

The relationship between man and the world transcends such oppositions as subject and object, interiority and exteriority. It is significant that Yourcenar uses the verb *contempler* instead of the more appropriate - when it comes to astronomy - *observer*. It allows us to think that the stars are not seen here as objects which are present-at-hand, but belong together with the onlooker to a greater spatiotemporal whole, *l’univers*. This passage tells us that the structural unity of space-time is not of a spiritual and metaphysical order and does not have a central stable point of reference, although it may appear to do so. The last sentence of the quotation above explains how phenomenal space-time, though contingent in itself, creates the illusion of a centre – and, one might add, the desire or the nostalgia for one. However, the unity of the universe is existential in that it is only understood through the occurrence of falling and death. Yourcenar is explicit about ‘la chute’ [de l’homme et des astres] ‘vers leur fin.’ The overall message is reminiscent of the adventure of Dasein in *Being and Time*. Man can only make sense of himself and the world by recognizing the possibility of his own end. What is then revealed is man’s participation in the spatiotemporal unity of Being (*l’univers*) – a unity which precedes any statement about the disorder of existence and the order of the world. Indeed, this revelation is encapsulated in Hadrien’s statement ‘Le désordre s’intégrait à l’ordre’.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> OR, p. 401.

<sup>43</sup> OR, p. 402.

<sup>44</sup> OR, p. 401.

In the paragraph that follows the above quotation, Yourcenar gives a vivid image of man's active participation in the universe. Hadrien recalls a night when he was younger which he had spent lying on the Syrian desert, contemplating the stars: 'couché sur le dos, les yeux bien ouverts'.<sup>45</sup> His posture, touching the earth and looking above to the sky is symbolic of both thrownness and futurity. His experience of union with what is imagined as the divine element is described as an *extase lucide* – an ecstatic unity of time which, in Heideggerian parlance, could be termed as being 'ahead of oneself' while 'being already in the world'.<sup>46</sup>

The theme of a unity that precedes and includes difference is further illuminated in *Un homme obscur*, in the discussion between the philosopher Léo Belmonte and Nathanaël, which I also examined in Chapter 1. Belmonte refers to the same process which Heidegger's existential phenomenology describes as the ontic reduction of existence and temporality into their inauthentic counterparts, namely, non-corporeality and eternity: 'Ces volitions, ces puissances, ces niveaux d'existence de moins en moins corporalisés, ces temps de plus en plus éternels [...] qu'est-ce, sinon ce que ceux qui ne savent pas ce dont ils parlent appellent grossièrement des Anges?'.<sup>47</sup> Thirty years after *Mémoires*, the impasse of conceptual representation in philosophy and in science is here dramatized with even more poignancy. Yourcenar gives us the dark image of a thinker who, having always been sceptical of the abstract beauty of his findings, only comes to discern the possibility of truth in the ugly corporeality of his own imminent death. In my earlier analysis I discussed the opposition between 'les choses et les idées', as well as Belmonte's despair in man's endless intellectual effort 'pour donner au chaos au moins l'apparence d'un ordre...'.<sup>48</sup> While these issues reproduce Yourcenar's problematic of the impossibility

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<sup>45</sup> OR, p. 402.

<sup>46</sup> Hadrien says, '[J]'ai connu plus d'une extase [...] Celle de la nuit syrienne fut étrangement lucide'. OR, p. 402.

<sup>47</sup> OR, p. 1009-10.

<sup>48</sup> OR, p. 1009.

of existential order in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, they are here tackled from the point of view of negative theology. Belmonte is looking for a divine point of reference from which the opposition between order and chaos can be transcended. God emerges from his discussion as the *missing* centre of things. It is what remains unaccounted for after representation has exhausted itself. Belmonte argues that God's nothingness is to be found everywhere, like water is found wherever one digs in the sand on a seashore. Then he concludes, 'Car le secret, c'est que je creuse en moi, puisqu'en ce moment je suis au centre : ma toux, cette boule d'eau et de boue qui monte et descend dans ma poitrine, mon dévoiement d'entrailles, nous sommes au centre...'<sup>49</sup> As in the case of Hadrien contemplating the stars, the contingency of what we feel as the 'present' of phenomenal time is here re-affirmed. Belmonte's meditations deal with such fundamental notions of existential phenomenology as the necessity of 'falling' into phenomenal time, the physicality of existence, the privacy of death and the search inside the self for a unified Being that escapes representation.

## Acceptance and guardianship

The key statement 'le désordre s'intégrait à l'ordre' reflects another discovery which Yourcenar formulated as succinctly at about the same time, namely, that 'la révolte se place à l'intérieur de l'acquiescement'.<sup>50</sup> In the previous chapters I studied the political and aesthetic implications of this assertion. In Yourcenar, *révolte* signifies a rebellion against a system of principles, ideas, religious or literary traditions, which eventually leads to the establishment of new a system of principles, ideas and so on. This situation gives rise to an understanding of modern history as a process of

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<sup>49</sup> *OR*, p. 1012.

<sup>50</sup> This phrase (*EM*, p. 156) from 'Présentation critique de Constantin Cavafy', an essay finished in 1953, was one of the focal ideas of Chapter 1 of my thesis.

conceptual overdetermination of *le vécu*, a thesis which encompasses Yourcenar's entire work.<sup>51</sup>

At a more fundamental level, *révolte* is addressed against this progressively rhetorical elaboration of experience and is therefore based on the assumption that such transcendence is possible. It is not simply because Yourcenar rejects this assumption that she always tends to side with *acceptation* or *acquiescement*. Accepting is for her a more comprehensive and more humble, as it were, attitude towards the past. Accepting contains revolt in the sense that the illusion of 'creation' always precedes the explicitness of frustration and irony. Revolt is thus a necessary dialectical moment before the illusory and fragmented character of reality is revealed. However, this moment does not lead to synthesis, for irony is not transcended. Instead, irony forces us to completely revise our attitude towards the idea of creativity. The issue is no longer how to create something original, but how to re-assume what has been handed down to us from the past, including fragmentation and conceptual overdetermination. The meaning of accepting is to be found in *reconstruire*, defined by Yourcenar in the phrase: 'collaborer avec le temps sous son aspect de passé [...] vers un plus long avenir'. As this statement suggests, accepting is a temporal act which is directed towards the future.

Thus, in *Mémoires*, when Hadrien completes the construction of the temple of the Olympeion – a project begun seven centuries earlier – he is able to say 'le passé retrouvait un visage d'avenir'.<sup>52</sup> This fusion of the dimensions of historical time is possible thanks to an accepting attitude towards temporality that goes beyond the dilemma between revolt or acceptance.

In the following passage, which summarizes Hadrien's existential politics and sense of history, it is made clear that that which he accepts is time itself.

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<sup>51</sup> As we saw, this idea was already central to Yourcenar's 1929 essay 'Diagnostic de l'Europe' and still present in Léo Belmonte's philosophy in *Un homme obscur*, published in 1982.

<sup>52</sup> *OR*, p. 422.

Cet esprit des temps, j'aurais peut-être été le premier à y subordonner consciemment tous mes actes, à en faire autre chose que le rêve fumeux d'un philosophe ou l'aspiration un peu vague d'un bon prince. Et je remerciais les dieux, puisqu'ils m'avaient accordé de vivre à une époque où la tâche qui m'était échue consistait à réorganiser prudemment un monde, et non à extraire du chaos une matière encore informe. [...] Je me félicitais que notre passé fût assez long pour nous fournir d'exemples, et pas assez lourd pour nous en écraser.<sup>53</sup>

It is worth noticing again the perception of history as the accumulation of legacies that would potentially overwhelm culture – which takes us back to the analogy of the branch of a tree that snaps under its own weight, in 'Diagnostic de l'Europe' (Chapter 3). Yourcenar suggests that Hadrien lived at a time when accepting the legacy of the past was not so heavy a task as it is today. But beyond its concrete political meaning ('réorganiser le monde') and in both the ancient and the modern historical contexts, order has an original existential significance. To accept time is above all to be able to envisage a totality, an order, which incorporates and even necessitates disorder, multiplicity, conflict and revolt. While in *Mémoires* the divine element as such plays only a secondary role, it is often evoked when Yourcenar wishes to direct our attention to that order that dispenses the multiformity of factual life. In the passage that follows, in which Hadrien explains his relationship with the divine element, this quasi-mystical order is described remarkably as 'cette force unique engagée dans la multiplicité des choses'.

Je m'imaginai secondant [le divin] dans son effort d'informer et d'ordonner un monde, d'en développer et d'en multiplier les circonvolutions, les ramifications, les détours. J'étais l'un des segments de la roue, l'un des aspects de cette force unique engagée dans la multiplicité des choses.<sup>54</sup>

My suggestion now is that Yourcenar's constitutive notion of accepting the past, and with it the possibility of a futural order that integrates disorder, shares many characteristics with Heidegger's idea of accepting and responding to the unity of Being.

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<sup>53</sup> OR, p. 372.

<sup>54</sup> OR, p. 398-99.



I have already mentioned the original fascination which, according to Heidegger, Dasein experiences towards Being. This pre-ontological attitude, already a form of primitive acceptance of Being, becomes explicit in Dasein's authentic solicitude towards Being, which Heidegger calls Care. Care is a form of acceptance, in the fundamental sense that authentic selfhood involves accepting Dasein's thrownness into the world and embracing Dasein's finiteness. As in the case of Yourcenar, accepting in Heidegger is not an ethical or rational choice, but a recognition of the existential state in which entities already are. This is why, in both authors, the meaning of authenticity is not originally ethical, but existential. Indeed, to be thrown is not a state to which Dasein has to give its consent, but one that it has to accept authentically as a fact. Heidegger is unambiguous about it: 'As Being, Dasein is something that has been thrown; it has been brought into its "there", but *not* of its own accord.'<sup>55</sup>

At the same time, accepting is also an attitude that encompasses inauthenticity, in a sense which is very close to Yourcenar's idea of *acquiescement* as the transcendence of *révolte*. There is room in *Being and Time* to hypothesize that inauthenticity as fear and alienation is a necessary step towards the realization of the homelessness of the self. Heidegger has called 'Falling' that state in which Dasein interprets itself in terms of ontic categories - a state which may involve the choice between revolt and accepting in the common sense of these words. Falling is thus associated with inauthenticity and the present. Dasein must have 'fallen' so as to be able to reclaim itself resolutely. Heidegger writes that falling is 'existentially determinative' and adds that 'In falling, nothing other than our potentiality-for-Being-in-the-world is the issue, even if in the mode of inauthenticity'.<sup>56</sup> George Steiner makes the following comment on this topic:

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<sup>55</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 329, emphasis by the author.

<sup>56</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 223-24.

But 'fallenness' is positive in [a] deeper sense. There must be inauthenticity and 'theyness', 'talk' and *Neugier*, so that *Dasein*, thus made aware of its loss of self, *can strive to return to authentic being*. At no point in his work is Heidegger more dialectical, more intent on the dynamics of an argument which springs from internal contradiction. *Verfall* becomes the absolutely necessary precondition for that struggle toward true *Dasein*, toward possession or, rather, repossession of self, which defines man's exposure to the challenge of the ontological.<sup>57</sup>

Falling is thus an integral part of *Dasein*'s acceptance of Being in the same way that *révolte*, in Yourcenar, belongs to *acceptation* and is not opposed to it.

I am not suggesting here that Falling and *révolte* define exactly the same attitude or mode of being, although both terms connote a degree of misinterpretation of man's possibilities and both lead to the necessary moment of irony. The point I rather wish to emphasize is that the notion of accepting marks an equally profound existential disposition for Heidegger and Yourcenar, beyond any immediate political, ethical or anthropological evaluations and beyond any negative or positive judgements. Writing about the 'call of Being', Jacques Derrida pointed out that there is in Heidegger 'un *oui* avant toute opposition du *oui* et du *non*'. In a relevant footnote he makes this comment: 'Je ne traduirai pas le mot *Zusage* parce qu'il rassemble des significations que nous dissociions en général, celles de la promesse et de l'acquiescement ou du consentement, de l'abandon originaire à ce qui se donne dans la promesse même.'<sup>58</sup> In context, Derrida's remark means (among other things) that, to formulate the ontological question, one has to be open to Being and therefore to have accepted it already in a relationship of co-belonging. Because *Dasein* and Being belong together, *Dasein* cannot be a creator, in the proper sense that it cannot by itself create Being, it cannot give meaning to Being. *Dasein*'s role is precisely to accept Being, to let Being be through *Dasein*.

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<sup>57</sup> George Steiner, *Heidegger* (London: Fontana Press, 1992), pp. 98-99, italics by the author.

<sup>58</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger et la question* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), pp. 114-15, emphasis by Derrida.

Heidegger has famously asserted man's role with regard to Being in the apophthegm 'Man is the shepherd of Being'.<sup>59</sup> J. Glenn Gray, who co-translated the 'Letter on Humanism', from where I quote the above phrase, annotates as follows:

Like that of the shepherd, man's true dignity consists in his function of taking care of, of being a protector and a guardian. His being is care (*Sorge*) in the comprehensive sense of the term. Man does not create Being, but he is responsible for it since, without his thinking and remembering, Being has no illumination, no voice, no word.<sup>60</sup>

Gray is not necessarily moralizing when he writes about 'man's true dignity'. This expression occurs in 'Letter on Humanism' (p. 233), when Heidegger wants to make the point that Western humanism is still an evaluative criterion that does not do justice to the humanity of man. Humanism (especially in its Sartrean version which Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism' set out to deconstruct) is pregnant with the idea of absolute self-creation, whereas, from an ontological perspective, being human involves only the distinction in relation to other entities of being able to respond to Being.

After *Being and Time*, the idea that 'creating' is fundamentally an exercise in custodianship and preservation of Being became stronger in Heidegger's thought. In his essay 'Building Dwelling Thinking', first published in German in 1954 as 'Bauen Wohnen Denken', Heidegger takes recourse to etymology to interpret *bauen* not as 'to build', but as 'to dwell', to which he then gives the sense of 'to preserve'. He writes: 'as long as we do not bear in mind that all building is in itself a dwelling, we cannot even adequately *ask*, let alone properly decide, what the building of buildings might be in its nature.' He then concludes with a new aphorism: '*The fundamental character of dwelling is [...] sparing and preserving.*'<sup>61</sup> Thus the humanist

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<sup>59</sup> 'Letter on Humanism', in David Farrell Krell (ed.), *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings* (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 234.

<sup>60</sup> J. Glenn Gray, 'Heidegger's "Being"', *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 49, No. 12 (Jun., 1952), pp. 415-422, (p. 416).

<sup>61</sup> 'Building Dwelling Thinking', in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 148-49, emphasis in the original.

representations of man as a master of his own being, and of creation as the ability to confer meaning to entities are shown to be inadequate. The meaning of accepting is in the custodianship and preservation of that which has been handed over to man, namely access to his own Being.

The relationship between creating and preserving in Heidegger mirrors the relationship between *construire* and *reconstruire* in Yourcenar. Heidegger's and Yourcenar's comparable attitudes with regard to accepting also extend to the idea of custodianship. The idea that man is the shepherd of Being finds its equivalent in Yourcenar's remark that Adam 'aurait [...] pu se sentir promu au rang de protecteur, d'arbitre, de modérateur de la création', because he was meant to be 'non le tyran, mais l'intendant [du monde]'.<sup>62</sup> While Yourcenar and Heidegger use theological terms, they both try to make a point that goes beyond theology: namely, that man is not a 'subject' who gets to know the 'objective truth' of existence but the only being who participates knowingly in the truth of Being. It is therefore man's prerogative to remember and safeguard this knowledge.

I have already discussed this passage from Yourcenar's essay 'Qui sait si l'âme des bêtes va en bas' in Chapter 1, in the context of my analysis of her idea of freedom as a form of acceptance. There I mentioned the ecological implications of Yourcenar's argument. Similarly, it comes as no surprise that Heidegger's interpretation of the quality of 'being human' as a form of preserving has given rise to ecological interpretations of his thought. On this topic, Leslie Paul Thiele writes:

Celebrating the unique capacities of human being to disclose in a way that preserves best ensures humanity's caretaking of the earth and the world. The fostering of human

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<sup>62</sup> From Yourcenar's essay 'Qui sait si l'âme des bêtes va en bas' (1981), *EM*, p. 374. It is not accidental that in the same essay Yourcenar rejects the conventional concept of humanism for promoting the idea of the superiority of man over other beings: 'un mouvement supposé rationaliste et laïque, l'humanisme, au sens récent et abusif du mot, qui prétend n'accorder d'intérêt qu'aux réalisations humaines, hérite directement de ce christianisme appauvri, auquel la connaissance et l'amour du reste des êtres ont été retirés', (*EM*, p. 374). As in Heidegger, Yourcenar's critique of the autonomy of the rationalist subject and her perception of man as the custodian of existence makes her sceptical towards the idea of humanism. Moreover, 'la connaissance et l'amour des êtres' is an idea that carries the same Christian undertones as Heidegger's notion of Care.

freedom, understood as a disclosive letting-be rather than a sovereign control, is precisely the measure that will best safeguard the earth's ecological diversity and health.<sup>63</sup>

This comes as further proof that Yourcenar's and Heidegger's independent trajectories of thought indeed meet in some unexpected if consistent ways.

Yourcenar has revisited the idea of guardianship several times in her work. Already in 'Diagnostic de l'Europe', she wrote of 'les poètes, gardiens des disciplines héréditaires de la pensée'.<sup>64</sup> According to this essay, 20<sup>th</sup>-Century poets attempt to emancipate themselves from the role of guardians, as a result of which 'leur libération a les aspects d'une déchéance'. True freedom, Yourcenar implies as early as in 1929, is in guardianship and acceptance of the past.

In *Mémoires*, Yourcenar conflated the role of 'gardien' with that of 'maître' in the following statement by Hadrien: 'La Grèce comptait sur nous pour être ses gardiens, puisqu'enfin nous nous prétendons ses maîtres'.<sup>65</sup> The point here is not simply that Rome would protect Greece from external military threat, but that it would maintain the conditions for Greeks to continue and perfect their cultural work ('pour laissez aux Grecs le temps de continuer, et de parfaire, leur œuvre').<sup>66</sup> There is much to be said about 'the work of the Greeks' as the limit of representation for both Yourcenar and Heidegger. As I will discuss in the next chapter, to be guardian of Greece would mean to preserve and safeguard the possibility for man to assign name and meaning to things and therefore to have exclusive access to their truth. However, within the context of my present argument, I suggest approaching this phrase as an

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<sup>63</sup> Thiele, 186. Another Heideggerian, Michael Zimmerman, takes Heidegger's ecological injunction even more literally: 'Already in the 1930s, Heidegger was speaking in a way very congenial to contemporary ecological thinkers: both believe that human beings become healthy and whole only when they learn how to dwell within the natural world, not when they attempt to subjugate it.' Michael Zimmerman, *Eclipse of the Self: The Development of Heidegger's Concept of Authenticity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), p. 168.

<sup>64</sup> *EM*, p. 1654.

<sup>65</sup> *OR*, p. 344.

<sup>66</sup> *OR*, p. 344.

additional piece of evidence for Yourcenar's thesis that authentic mastery and freedom lies in accepting the legacy of the past.

This point can be further supported by the references to 'gardiens' and 'garde' in the 'Carnets de notes de *Mémoires d'Hadrien*'. For example, thinking of some historians and artists whose work was related to the life and reign of Hadrian, Yourcenar notes: 'Sentiment d'appartenir à une espèce de *Gens Ælia*, de faire partie de la foule des secrétaires du grand homme, de participer à cette relève de la garde impériale que montent les humanistes et les poètes se relayant autour d'un grand souvenir.'<sup>67</sup> Behind Yourcenar's grandiloquence lies a holistic perception of temporality which attempts to go beyond simple scholarly respect for history. Yourcenar pinpoints the feeling of belonging to a past which has become almost personal: it has become a 'souvenir' which defies the objectivity of temporal distance. It is even implied that the literary work is the actualization of a writer's acceptance of the past. *Mémoires d'Hadrien* would then be not an interpretation of emperor Hadrian's life, but a letting-be of that *souvenir*, as it recites itself through its recipient, the author. This of course brings us back to the idea of *Mémoires* being not an original novel but the translation of Hadrien's dictation to Yourcenar, a central metaphor examined in the previous chapter.

The lofty attitude of this passage is counterbalanced by a more subtle comment, a few notes down in the same 'Carnets de notes'. After a visit to the Villa Adriana, the emperor Hadrian's residence in Tivoli, Yourcenar thinks of the thousands of 'silent lives' of beggars, idlers even looters who have lived or passed by the Villa since Hadrian's time. Interestingly, she writes that she happened to see the personal items of a shepherd, left at a spot which he had apparently appropriated for himself among the ruins. The shepherd is an emblematic reference, and is mentioned again in the next note of the 'Carnets'. Yourcenar's response to the discovery of the

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<sup>67</sup> OR, p. 538.

shepherd's spot is exactly the same as in the last quotation above: 'Sensation d'humble intimité à peu près pareille à celle qu'on éprouve au Louvre, après la fermeture, à l'heure où les lits de sangle des gardiens surgissent au milieu des statues.'<sup>68</sup> Here, 'gardiens' has a metaphorical as well as a literal meaning. The shepherd living and working amidst the ruins of the Villa Adriana is compared to the museum guards whose job is to protect similar vestiges. Both have a factual, un-theoretical relationship with the past and Yourcenar participates in this feeling. It is not a question of being reconciled with nature and history: accepting the past is described as a humble way of being, whereby what has already happened is part of what is happening. Similarly, to be a guardian and a shepherd is not about protecting tradition from change and contamination but about understanding oneself as part of the past and the past as part of one's life.

## Existence and history

For both Yourcenar and Heidegger, the fusion of 'inner' life with 'external' history is possible thanks to the perception of the self as a dynamic entity which extends temporally. In the same way that the self never lives simply in an objective 'now' but in its own future and past, it also lives in a *collective* future and past, as *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, perhaps more than any other book by Yourcenar, tries to establish. Historically, Hadrien understands himself as a receiver and a deliverer of a heritage. On the narrative level, the most obvious way in which this is actualized is the epistolary form of the novel. That *Mémoires* is a letter attenuates the solipsism to which the notion of authentic selfhood is vulnerable. This is not so much because as a letter it is addressed to someone else, but because it communicates a sense of

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<sup>68</sup> OR, p. 539.

‘handing down’ on a historical level. The novel reaches considerable depth and sophistication because the stress is equally placed on what is handed down – the historical heritage of Greece and Rome – *and* on the existential attitude *per se* of accepting this heritage.

Nonetheless, the passage from the existential to the historical and from the individual to the collective is not without complications, for both Heidegger and Yourcenar. In the rest of this chapter, I shall pursue the dialogue between these two thinkers in a more critical spirit. I shall first discuss the relationship between personal and collective history in Heidegger and then I shall begin to question Yourcenar’s perception of the historico-political subject as it is embodied principally in the figure of Hadrien.

The unity of life and history is a central theme of *Being and Time*, where it is interpreted in terms of the derivation of historical time from the temporality of Dasein (Division II, Chapter V.) In a manner characteristic of his analytical method, Heidegger takes a step beyond the opposition between the inner time of the self and the external time of history. The question is not for him to reconcile the two, but to re-define historicity in terms of what affects Dasein, anything else being beyond the scope of the phenomenological premise. He claims that it is Dasein which affects itself, as it exists ecstatically. Dasein extends beyond itself, dwelling in its own future and past, and coming back to itself to assume different possible historical meanings. In this way, Heidegger attempts to transcend the categories of interiority and exteriority. There is nothing external or internal to Dasein, because it always already exists in a world. Heidegger can then assert that ‘what is *primarily* historical is Dasein’.<sup>69</sup> Dasein does not live *within* history as it does not live *within* time. It rather exists historically, simply by virtue of existing temporally. In a sense, if existing generally means being open to possibilities, each human being as a unique and

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<sup>69</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 433, emphasis in the original.



concrete existence chooses to assume a number of concrete possibilities, thus expressing himself or herself historically.

Dasein assigns historical meaning to its own Being by assuming such possibilities of existence as come down to it in terms of a heritage that it accepts. Acceptance of tradition and the past – the notion in which I am chiefly interested here – is an act and an attitude substantiated in and by the self. The possibilities offered to the self through what Heidegger calls heritage – *Erbe* – belong to the self and not to a putative past which is over and done with. By accepting tradition and the past, Dasein essentially accepts itself. This is the first movement in the process of self-historicizing of Dasein, which determines Dasein's 'fate'. Fate (*Schicksal*) defines paradoxically man's freedom to negotiate with those aspects of tradition which maintain their relevance and urgency with regard to the finiteness of existence. Heidegger defines fate as 'Dasein's primordial historicizing, which lies in authentic resoluteness and in which Dasein *hands itself down* to itself, free for death, in a possibility which it has inherited and yet has chosen'.<sup>70</sup>

Heidegger's discussion of the historicity of individual Dasein in *Being and Time* is followed by an analysis of the historicity of communities and peoples. This is the second movement in Dasein's effort to understand history as part of its own structure. Communities and peoples are considered as collective entities which exist historically and project their own history in the same way that Dasein historicizes itself. However, the projection of individual to collective history and of existential to historical time is not entirely convincing. In what follows, I shall discuss briefly the problems involved in Heidegger's attempt to understand history on the basis, ultimately, of individual Dasein. Subsequently, I shall establish a parallel between Dasein as the fundamental agent of history and the figure of Hadrien, the authentic hero and leader of *Mémoires d'Hadrien*. I shall thus begin to challenge the subtle

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<sup>70</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 435, emphasis in the original.

coordination of the existential and the political in Yourcenar's text. In the present context, this interrogation will take the form of a number of questions, which will be further addressed and answered in the following chapter.

If fate designates the 'primordial historizing' of Dasein, and does so in a manner which is directly and explicitly linked to Dasein's self-temporalization, things are not equally clear in Heidegger's account of 'co-historizing' as the 'historizing of the community, of a people'.<sup>71</sup> He calls this process 'destiny' (*Geschick*, a word which is etymologically linked with both *Schicksal* and *Geschichte*, history). He specifies that the destiny of a people does not consist of the sum of individual fates, but is a form of historizing of Dasein as Being-with-Others. Paul Ricœur summarized and criticized this point as follows:

Tout indique que Heidegger s'est borné ici à suggérer l'idée d'une homologie entre destinée communautaire et destin individuel, et à esquisser le transfert des mêmes notations d'un plan à l'autre : héritage d'un fonds de potentialités, résolutions, etc., – quitte à marquer la place en creux de catégories plus spécifiquement appropriées à l'être-en-commun : lutte, obéissance combattante, loyauté.<sup>72</sup>

There is certainly not much in *Being and Time* that refutes Ricœur's suggestion. The transition from fate to destiny is not adequately described, while the notion of co-historizing indeed seems to designate the historical self-affection of a community, understood as collective Dasein.

In a footnote to the passage quoted above, Ricœur suggests that Heidegger's failure to account for history on a collective level can be linked to his one-time pro-Nazi affiliation. More specifically, Ricœur identifies the problem in the transfer to the sphere of the community of the existential theme of Being-for-death. As a result of this transfer, Heidegger thinks of the community, and specifically of the German *Volk*, as an entity envisaging its own dissolution in the same way that individual Dasein envisages its death. The community is thus understood in terms of its desire

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<sup>71</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 436.

<sup>72</sup> Paul Ricœur, p. 138. Ricœur uses the established translations in French of *Schicksal* as *destin* (*individuel*) and of *Geschick* as *destinée* (*communautaire*).

for heroic and fateful self-becoming, which, Ricœur implies, brings Heidegger closer to the National Socialists.

The case of Heidegger's engagement with the Nazi party is of particular interest for my study because it reveals the aporias and risks involved in attempting to understand history in terms of individual existence. Paradoxically, when Dasein is taken out of its 'proper' existential context and transferred to the level of politics and history, it transforms from a dynamic absence to a violent and appropriative presence. Commenting on one of Heidegger's strongest pronouncements in favour of the Nazis, his 1933 Rectoral Address, Jürgen Habermas made a similar point to that of Ricœur :

If [Heidegger] had hitherto used 'Dasein' in an unmistakable way for the existentially isolated individual on his course toward Death, now he substitutes for this "in-each-case-mine" Dasein the collective Dasein of a fatefully existing and "in-each-case-our" people [*Volk*]. All the existential categories stay the same and yet with one stroke they change their very meaning – and not just the horizon of their expressive significance.<sup>73</sup>

Thus, Heidegger's claim that collective history can be understood on the basis of individual existence is a bold but not entirely consistent interpretation. As a result of this interpretation, individual Dasein assumes the character of the *Führer*, or transforms into the German *Volk*.

As I shall discuss in the following chapter, there are elements in *Mémoires* suggesting that Yourcenar also attempted to translate the existential into the historical in a way that parallels the historicization of Dasein in *Being and Time*. It is possible to establish an analogy between the historico-political subject in Heidegger and that in Yourcenar. There is an existential kinship between, on the one hand, Heidegger's *Führer* and *Volk*, and on the other, the leader (Hadrien) and the community (the Roman Empire) which define the historical and political context of *Mémoires*.

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<sup>73</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. by Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p. 157.

The overall consequences of this situation for the existential-historical fiction of Marguerite Yourcenar are crucial. The intersection between existence and history proves to be the point of origin of the authentic hero of the narrative. Could it be that this hero is blind to the way history is not only determined by the self but also determinative of it, in a way that transcends the distinction between authentic and inauthentic selfhood? Does Hadrien, the most historical, heroic and 'fateful' figure in Yourcenar's fiction, fail to suspect the otherness of history, namely, the fact that it cannot be entirely grasped by the self – whether or not the self is understood as *Dasein*? Consequently, does Yourcenar's powerful perception of authenticity, much as it does justice to the impurity and disorder of factual existence, apply after all only to a universalized humanist subject? This perception of subjectivity would risk the exclusion of other non-anthropocentric, non-Western cultures, other approaches to life, such as animality and irrationality, that the subject cannot adequately represent in and for itself. To that extent, there may be totalitarian aspects to the Yourcenarian political subject which warrant further investigation. While I am not implying that this subject should be interpreted in exclusively Heideggerian terms as the *Führer* and heroic leader of the community, the character of Hadrien could represent aspects of selfhood that are less 'authentic' than the Yourcenarian text initially suggests.

In the same critical spirit, it may be asked whether the notions of 'accepting' and 'guarding' one's 'heritage' intimate one's exclusive commitment to one's culture and history in such a way that elements that are not part of one's heritage remain foreign and forgotten. By accepting what is 'handed down' to one, for example, the art, literature and philosophy that belong to one's language and culture, one is bound to repeat only those 'possibilities of existence' that are already available to one and can therefore be measured against the criterion of existential authenticity. These questions concern equally Heidegger and Yourcenar, for they both insisted on the possibility of authenticity as the commitment to accepting, repeating and re-constructing the past.

The discussion on the historicity of Dasein in *Being and Time* concludes with the concept of repetition, which defines how Dasein becomes engaged in a discussion with the historical past. Repetition establishes the continuity of history through the succession of interpretations and re-evaluations of structures of meaning that have reached each thinking subject from the past. Every Dasein has to come to terms with these structures, and 'repeat' them in such a way as to test their solidity in relation to the bare facticity of its own 'there'. Repetition thus contains a moment of reclaiming, explicitly appropriating, the past for the purpose of asking every time more concretely the question of existence. Therefore, repetition is the Heideggerian concept that comes closest of all to Yourcenar's idea of *acceptation / acquiescement*. Authentic repetition is the process by which Dasein accepts and questions the past *as* representation. Through repetition the self understands the past as something new, something to be actively reclaimed from the future.

Heidegger's intricate logic leads Ricœur to write that the concept of repetition 'rouvre le passé en direction de l'à-venir'.<sup>74</sup> This remark mirrors accurately Hadrien's thought after the consecration of the Olympeion, as quoted above: 'le passé retrouvait un visage d'avenir.' In its simplicity and metaphoricity, this phrase can be interpreted more generally than we attempted earlier. It is possible to formulate Yourcenar's implication as follows: Rome led by Hadrien initiates a renegotiation with classical Greece through the consecration of the Olympeion and other works of cultural reconstruction by Hadrien. Rome appropriates for itself the Greek past which is not historically its own, but which belongs to it now, insofar as only it, Rome, can see through the layers of representations because of which Greece appears to recede to distant history. By doing so, Rome enters into a conversation with a unique culture which is based on things themselves, rather than on representations of things. Rome

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<sup>74</sup> Ricœur, p. 139.

is ready to re-enact Greece, and its future is announced by Hadrien in terms of its commitment to do so.

With this hypothesis, which I shall elaborate and support further in the next chapter, I do not seek to articulate a historical argument on Roman history. I am rather attempting to reproduce an assumption, perhaps also a conviction, held by Yourcenar at the time of the writing of *Mémoires d'Hadrien*. This assumption is not limited to the way Yourcenar may have understood Rome and Greece, but is relevant to her philosophical and cultural analysis of contemporary Europe. As I have already suggested, Yourcenar wishes to initiate an un-mediated debate with Rome and Greece, beyond any sentiment of nostalgia for the past or vague passion for antiquity. This is conveyed by the metaphor of *Mémoires* being a 'dictation' which was then 'translated' by Yourcenar. Working on the basis of an analogy between contemporary Europe and ancient Rome, Yourcenar invites the (Western) reader to retrieve the Greek past and make it her own 'again', in the same way that Hadrien reclaims Greece for Rome. Yet the question remains as to whether the existential framework of this operation does in fact allow for the retrieval of the past and ensure access to things themselves, as Yourcenar hoped.

In one of her very few references to Heidegger, Yourcenar points accurately to the element which links her thought with that of the German philosopher: the construction and deconstruction of representation in time. In a short letter to Jean Beaufret, who had sent her a copy of *Questions IV*, a collection of essays and seminars by Heidegger translated into French by Beaufret and others, she praises the 'noyau brûlant de la philosophie de Heidegger', which she contrasts to popular versions of existentialism, then still dominant in French intellectual life. The letter is dated 17 October 1976, that is, a few months after Heidegger's death. Yourcenar continues as follows:

J'ai été très sensible, chez le philosophe, à la recherche d'une sorte de perception originelle à travers l'étymologie [...]. Ayant un peu – très peu – approché du sanscrit, je me rends mieux compte de cette fascination du mot 'originel', tel que Heidegger le rencontre chez les pré-socratiques, où le mot est encore tout près d'une part de l'acte, et de l'autre des choses. Un peu traductrice moi-même, je puis me rendre compte de la réussite qu'il y a à faire passer ces notions de base dans une langue aussi intellectualisée que la nôtre.<sup>75</sup>

This paragraph brings together some of the major themes driving the thought of both Yourcenar and Heidegger: the need to return to the things themselves; the abstractive character of linguistic representation; the inquiry into the poietic function of words; the identification of Greece as the topos of linguistic and cultural originality; the perception of contemporary culture as a palimpsest of conceptual interpretations; and finally the mediatory role of translation in the recovery of original meanings.<sup>76</sup>

These themes lie behind Yourcenar's next comment, or rather, her expression of surprise in finding how relevant to her thought the Heideggerian notion of destruction is. Yourcenar writes: 'J'ai été frappée, p. 271, par une remarque de Heidegger qui recoupe *L'Œuvre au noir* alchimique, prise par moi comme métaphore centrale d'un de mes livres.' The editors of Yourcenar's *Lettres* quote the relevant remark from *Questions IV*, in which Heidegger explains that *destruction* has to be understood in the sense of *dé-faire* and not of *dévaster*. The French text that impressed Yourcenar reads as follows: 'Mais qu'est-ce qui se défait ? Réponse : ce qui recouvre le sens de l'être, les structures accumulées les unes sur les autres et qui masquent le sens de l'être. La Destruction vise alors la découverte du sens initial de l'être.'<sup>77</sup> Destruction is a moment in the dialogue with the past which involves the de-construction of ontological concepts which have reached us historically, in the express effort to uncover the truth of Being.<sup>78</sup> Destruction is thus related with Heidegger's

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<sup>75</sup> Letter to Jean Beaufret, 17 October, 1976, pp. 661-662, in *Lettres à ses amis et quelques autres*, p. 660.

<sup>76</sup> On the function of translation in Heidegger, see Andrew Benjamin, *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy*, Chapter 1, 'The Literal and the Figural Translated', pp. 9-38.

<sup>77</sup> *Lettres à ses amis et quelques autres*, p. 660-61 and 661n. The quotation is from Beaufret's recapitulation of Heidegger's 'Séminaire du Thor' of 1969, now in Martin Heidegger, *Questions III et IV*, trans. by Jean Beaufret et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 426.

<sup>78</sup> The concept of *Destruktion* is discussed in Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 44f.

understanding of truth as unconcealment (*a-lētheia*), an idea which evidently presupposes that there *is* a truth waiting to be unconcealed. On the other hand, destruction is connected with repetition in the sense that it brings again to the attention of Dasein hidden meanings and manifestations of Being in older philosophical traditions which may have passed unnoticed by their authors. Thus destruction does not in fact ‘destroy’ anything else than the perception of Being in the present. It is this positive dimension of destruction that Yourcenar appreciates in Heidegger, because it agrees with her concept of *acceptation*.

One must embrace not only the idea of the hiddenness of Being – the existential-phenomenological assumption -, but also the accumulated structures of signification behind which the meaning of Being lies hidden. The metaphorical meaning of destruction as it dissolves into acceptance is emphasized by Yourcenar more than it is by Heidegger. Indeed, *L'Œuvre au noir*, to which Yourcenar refers in her letter to Beaufret, is based on the metaphor of alchemy, a practice involving different stages of negative and positive work, in search of the philosopher’s stone. In the novel, this process is summed up by the expression ‘*Solve et coagula*’.<sup>79</sup> Alchemy stands for the process of removing superimposed layers of interpretation, until a primordial truth – ‘le sens de l’être’ – is finally exposed. It becomes evident that Yourcenar understood *Questions IV* in a way which touches basic questions of being, meaning and representation. Her letter to Beaufret suggests an unexpectedly profound and conscious kinship of thought between her and Heidegger.

It must be emphasized that Yourcenar’s recovery of ‘truth’ in her fiction can never be reduced to a simple essentialist thesis on sexuality, ethnicity, race and so on. Significantly, no philosopher’s stone is ever found in *L'Œuvre au noir*. This most enigmatic of Yourcenar’s novels finishes with Zénon’s suicide, an act of self-knowledge, for sure, but not one of definite (dis)closure of meaning. The alchemical

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<sup>79</sup> OR, p. 702.



process never goes further than its first stage, *l'œuvre au noir*.<sup>80</sup> This serves as a further reminder that when we suspect the presence of a universalized subject in Yourcenar, we should not look for any essence neatly enveloped within layers of cultural meaning. The self-authentication of the hero does not add meaning to his existence, but resides in his reconciliation with his impurity, his facticity, which is devoid of ethical, psychological or other content. At the end of *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, of *L'Œuvre au noir* and of *Un homme obscur*, the principal character dies alone having recovered no sense of identity, cultural, political, sexual, and so on, but an elementary sense of belonging to a factual world. The dying hero has the paradoxical beauty that Yourcenar noticed in ruins, in that he represents allegorically man's belonging to the world, but symbolizes nothing.

There is no surplus meaning to be derived from the image of the dying hero other than the self-evidence – on which Heidegger above all insisted – that one dies one's own death. Yet Yourcenar clearly admires her heroes and invites her readers to participate in her admiration. This much is clear from her interviews, the 'Carnets de notes' which supplement *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, and the 'Carnets de notes' at the end of *L'Œuvre au noir*.<sup>81</sup> This admiration that culminates in the death of the hero has inspired the following remark from 'Carnets de notes de *L'Œuvre au noir*':

Rien de plus secret ni de plus difficile à atteindre que la notion authentique d'un Dieu personnel (ou personnalisé) qui s'étale un peu partout sous ses formes stéréotypées. (L'*Isvara* des yogis hindous.) Zénon y arrive (ou en tout cas arrive à l'entrevoir en tant qu'hypothèse) deux ou trois heures avant sa mort.<sup>82</sup>

In spite of the parentheses, used to denote Yourcenar's reservations and protect her thesis from too literal an interpretation, the positive goal of self-authentication in the

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<sup>80</sup> The alchemical process involves two further stages, *l'œuvre au blanc* and *l'œuvre au rouge*. See *OR*, p. 702-703.

<sup>81</sup> Yourcenar has spoken and written with admiration especially about Hadrien and Zénon on numerous occasions. By way of example, see her interview with Bernard Pivot, when she talks about 'La grandeur d'Hadrien' (p. 239), and says about Zénon, 'On a l'impression d'un tempérament presque indestructible', (p. 245). Maurice Delcroix (ed.), *Marguerite Yourcenar: Portrait d'une voix*.

<sup>82</sup> *OR*, p. 863. The 'Carnets de notes de *L'Œuvre au noir*' was first published posthumously in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, in two parts: No 452 (sept. 90), p. 38-53; and No 453 (oct. 90), p. 54-67.

face of death is at the heart of Yourcenar's existentialism. The same theme is fundamental to Heidegger's existential anthropology. Critical and more specifically deconstructive evaluations of Heidegger's concepts of truth and authenticity can thus contribute to our appreciation of the same concepts in Yourcenar.

This final part of my thesis can take different forms. For example, it would now be possible to focus more intensely on the question of temporality and see how the problem of reconciling existential and historical time, a weak point of *Being and Time*, affects Yourcenar's historiography, her method of re-capturing the past as a writer and her strategy for ensuring narrative authenticity in the historical novel. Alternatively, it is possible to trace and record in more detail than we have done so far certain typical Heideggerian themes in the development of Yourcenar's main fictional characters, namely, their sense of the inauthenticity of philosophical, ethical, psychological and religious interpretations of life, their dealing with the past and their coming to terms with the idea of death, on the way to authentic selfhood. Within the contours of my thesis, I propose instead to evaluate the aesthetic and political ramifications of existential authenticity in Yourcenar, having in mind the cultural context of modernity in which she and Heidegger are placed, and choosing as principal work of reference *Mémoires d'Hadrien*. I shall approach more critically Heidegger's and Yourcenar's direct or indirect claims that authentic selfhood transcends representation while always remaining a hostage to it. Based on deconstructive criticism of Heidegger by Lacoue-Labarthe and Lyotard, I shall attempt to show that the definition of existential and political authenticity necessitates the arbitrary marginalization and exclusion of elements which refuse, or are not able, to conform to the vision of authentic subjectivity in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### YOURCENAR'S POLITICAL AESTHETICISM AND AMBIVALENT DISCOURSE OF IDENTITY

In *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, the narrative of the search for authenticity has a double focus. On the one hand it concentrates on the human subject, Hadrien, and his struggle for self-formation. One of the major challenges to Hadrien's sense of identity comes from personal biography, in the form of his doomed love for Antinoüs. An even more demanding arena is that of statesmanship. In Hadrien's effort to re-structure the state through legislation, in his cultural policy, centred on the revival of the Greek spirit, and even in his defensive military action, which aims at pacifying the world, we may discern the signs of a strategy of existential self-containment and authentication. Within the internal logic of the novel, the Roman Empire and the city of Rome in particular can be considered as projections of the self which define the phenomenal limits of consciousness. Moreover, if Antinoüs constitutes a challenge, it is because he presents Hadrien with an opportunity – entirely missed, as we shall see – to perceive the human subject in its absolute and irreducible otherness, beyond the project of authentication.

On the other hand, the narrative of *Mémoires d'Hadrien* focuses on the political subject which, in the framework of the novel, takes the form of Rome. In addition to their function as metaphors for the psyche and the self in general, the empire and its capital are represented as historical and geopolitical formations which also tend

towards self-authentication. The meaning of authenticity at the level of the state is less well defined by Yourcenar and more difficult to establish, but its importance in the novel cannot be overstated. In the opening chapter of *Mémoires*, it is made clear that Rome is in a state of crisis which affects above all the possibility of making valid statements. In the absence of any standard metaphysical referent and with the gods of antiquity unable to guarantee the veracity of any judgement, Rome has to look in itself and strive to realize its inherent potential. Indeed, the triptych proposed by Hadrien, *Humanitas*, *Felicitas*, *Libertas*, defines the political objective in an immanent way.<sup>1</sup> As I mentioned already (e.g. in Chapter 2, with reference to the temple of the Olympeion in Athens), the model which Hadrien's Rome is invited to follow in its path to authenticity is Greece. *Mémoires* describes Rome's renegotiation with its Hellenic heritage under Hadrien, as well as its effort to retrieve its political identity without having recourse to imaginary or symbolic representations. This is also a wager that Hadrien ultimately loses. However, as Yourcenar has suggested in her interviews and as the immediate success of the novel arguably confirms, this challenge was still very relevant to Europe as a newly ambitious geopolitical formation in the years after the Second World War.

The human subject and the political subject are brought together in the character of Hadrien in a way which implies that they are in any case inseparable. Still, the pursuit of authenticity at the level of the state is modelled on the pursuit of authenticity at the level of individual existence. I came to this view in Chapter 1, while examining the perception of freedom that infiltrates *Mémoires*. My conclusion there was that freedom for Hadrien means above all freedom to accept that we only have access to the world through a process of conceptual representation. Moreover, I suggested that the best way to understand the paradoxical form of freedom proposed

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<sup>1</sup> '*Humanitas*, *Felicitas*, *Libertas* : ces beaux mots qui figurent sur les monnaies de mon règne, je ne les ai pas inventés. N'importe quel philosophe grec, presque tout Romain cultivé se propose du monde la même image que moi' (*OR*, p. 372).

by Yourcenar is through the aesthetic theory that infiltrates her fiction and criticism. Yourcenar recognizes that politics (just as philosophy, historiography and poetry) has generally been based on the erroneous assumption that artistic creation is possible, despite the evidence to the contrary offered by the spectacle of ruins. Because politics uses the paradigm of artistic creation and because art as creativity is necessarily doomed to fail its stated purpose, Hadrien envisages a new kind of politics which does not oppose this (dis)order of things. This politics does not aspire to the construction and mastery of a new world but to reconstruction and collaboration with the past.

However, this chapter will argue that there is a marked disparity between the philosophy of politics announced in *Mémoires d'Hadrien* and Hadrien's political programme and actions as they are narrated in this novel. The politics of acceptance and recognition of difference appears to be theoretically consistent, and indeed operates well in certain privileged contexts, including that of the relationship between Rome and Greece. Yet this politics is strenuously tested and ultimately fails when Hadrien attempts to implement it on cultures and peoples located at or beyond the margins of the empire, such as the 'barbarian' populations and especially the Jews. This failure has a metaphorical sense. It suggests that the idea of 'difference' on which political authenticity rests is still defined in an essentialist way, and excludes incompatible, wholly irreconcilable versions of subjectivity. The Jews introduce an element of absolute alterity with which, I shall submit, the novel does not fully come to terms. The narrative of Hadrien's Jewish wars distances itself from the cause of the Jews and highlights instead the drama of Hadrien as he reluctantly inflicts violence on them. Despite this violence, the novel insists that Hadrien's politics celebrates difference and helps ensure personal and political authenticity.

In the present chapter, I shall stress the ambivalence of Yourcenar's discourse of difference and political identity. I shall locate and discuss instances of alterity that the narrative of *Mémoires d'Hadrien* refuses to recognize as such. The political

aestheticism that infiltrates this novel will be interrogated in the context of the aesthetic perception of politics in the West, a perception inspired by a characteristically modern understanding of Greek art and philosophy. I shall begin by examining the idea of the universality of Greece in Yourcenar.

## The universality of Greece

In the following passage from *Mémoires*, Hadrien refers to the Greek origin of his political ambition.

Il me semblait parfois que l'esprit grec n'avait pas poussé jusqu'à leurs extrêmes conclusions les prémisses de son propre génie : les moissons restaient à faire ; les épis mûrs au soleil et déjà coupés étaient peu de chose à côté de la promesse éleusinienne du grain caché dans cette belle terre. Même chez mes sauvages ennemis sarmates, j'avais trouvé des vases au pur profil, un miroir orné d'une image d'Apollon, des lueurs grecques comme un pâle soleil sur la neige. J'entrevois la possibilité d'helléniser les barbares, d'atticiser Rome, d'imposer doucement au monde la seule culture qui se soit un jour séparée du monstrueux, de l'informe, de l'immobile, qui ait inventé une définition de la méthode, une théorie de la politique et de la beauté.<sup>2</sup>

While this passage speaks for itself in terms of Hadrien's aspiration to spread the Greek culture to the world, two specific points have to be stressed. Firstly, further evidence is offered here to support the claim that Yourcenar understands politics through aesthetics. This idea is implied by the references to works of art ('des vases au pur profil, un miroir') in the context of politics and war; by the suggested identification of the 'barbarians' with disorder and the lack of art (*le monstrueux, l'informe, l'immobile*); and finally by the bringing together of *politique* and *beauté* in the last phrase of the quotation. Secondly and more to the point, Rome is not simply inspired by the paradigm of Greece, it also understands itself as Greece's organic heir and the political enforcer of its spirit. If Greece defined the theory and the method,

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<sup>2</sup> OR, p. 344.

Rome has the historical mission to universalize the subject of Greek aesthetics and to implement it, even impose it, on the known world. To use Yourcenar's metaphor of light ('le soleil', 'les lueurs'), we may put forward that Hadrien's dream is to shed the Greek light to all dark corners of the world, so that everything comes into form and consciousness.

The aesthetico-political role of Rome is also attested in other parts of the novel. At a subsequent point, Yourcenar specifies how Rome understands itself as the institutional force that transforms the Greek aesthetic spirit into political praxis:

[...] il m'arrivait de me dire que le sérieux un peu lourd de Rome, son sens de la continuité, son goût du concret, avaient été nécessaires pour transformer en réalité ce qui restait en Grèce une admirable vue de l'esprit, un bel élan de l'âme. Platon avait écrit *La République* et glorifié l'idée du juste, mais c'est nous qui, instruits par nos propres erreurs, nous efforcions péniblement de faire de l'État une machine apte à servir les hommes, et risquant le moins possible de les broyer.<sup>3</sup>

Hadrien continues with several further examples of the way in which Rome decidedly transformed the Greek intention into action. It is always worth noticing the presence of the aesthetic parameter in Yourcenar's discourse about the State: here, she describes Greek thought as 'une *admirable vue* de l'esprit, un *bel élan* de l'âme'.

This eminently aesthetic view lies behind Hadrien's next remark in the same paragraph. Deliberating on the importance of the different cultures that were under Roman sovereignty (Spain, Africa, '[les] gouttes de sang celte, ibère, punique'), he points out: 'La Grèce m'avait aidé à évaluer ces éléments, qui n'étaient pas grecs. Il en allait de même d'Antinoüs ; j'avais fait de lui l'image même de ce pays passionné de beauté ; c'en serait peut-être le dernier dieu.'<sup>4</sup> This statement expresses clearly what has hitherto been a suspicion in the novel, namely that Greece does not simply define the values and assessment standards of the Roman political project, but it does so in an exclusive manner. Foreign peoples and cultures are appreciated by Hadrien and accepted in the universal Roman family to the extent that they are compatible

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<sup>3</sup> OR, p. 459.

<sup>4</sup> OR, p. 459-60.

with, and comprehensible by, the Greek spirit. To be sure, the Greek paradigm is here chosen because of its supposed receptivity and inclusiveness of barbarian elements. However, one cannot help but discern in Hadrien's principles a colonial attitude of appropriation and therefore of forgetfulness or indifference towards what remains alien.

These remarks do not necessarily suggest that Yourcenar's own perception of Greece coincides with the one expressed in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*. Emperor Hadrian's philhellenism and his dedication to the revival and spreading of Greek culture are historical facts which had to be emphasized and interpreted in the novel. Moreover, we know that Yourcenar studied and valued other cultures, notably the Japanese and the Chinese, which are not originally related with the Greek vision of the world. This certainly indicates that Yourcenar was able to distance herself from what I am discussing here as Greek aesthetics, however formative her classical European background was. What is more, she was a persistent critic of the (still problematic) reduction of the manifold faces of ancient Greece into one idealized version of 'the Greek miracle'. In her introduction to *La Couronne et la lyre*, her book of translations of Greek lyric poetry, she discusses the reasons for this phenomenon, particularly in France:

Les querelles entre partisans des Anciens (catégorie où l'on fourrait pêle-mêle Hésiode et Ménandre, sans parler d'Horace et de Lucain) et sectateurs des Modernes, suivies du long débat Classiques-Romantiques, vain partout et interminable en France, puis d'affrontements idéologiques et scolaires où l'hellénisme était mis en cause, ont contribué à créer une série de stéréotypes de la Grèce [...].

Yourcenar enumerates some of these stereotypes and concludes as follows:

En faite, l'étonnante richesse de la Grèce, et de la poésie que la Grèce nous a laissée, est que les expériences les plus diverses y ont été tentées, et que ses poètes en on enregistré une bonne part.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar, *La Couronne et la lyre: Anthologie de la poésie grecque ancienne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), pp. 14-15. In the same introduction, Yourcenar also rejects the thesis of the superiority of Greek culture in relation to other literary traditions, including that of modern Europe. See especially pp. 38-40. 'Vue dans ces perspectives, la poésie grecque a cessé de pouvoir être considérée comme l'un des aspects d'un unique et inexplicable « miracle grec »', p. 40.



Emphasis is placed on the diversity of the ways that Greeks experienced life and represented it artistically and poetically. It is because of this diversity and richness that Yourcenar can write in *Mémoires* that Hadrien could understand and appreciate other cultures on the basis of Greek values. Nevertheless, it is also true that because of its admirable inclusiveness, Greek thought assumes for Yourcenar the specific character of universality. The result is that this thought does not simply relegate those ‘incomprehensible’ cultures, experiences or forms of aesthetics to the category of ‘barbarian’, but it also suppresses them and renders them invisible.

This point will become more evident in my discussion of *Mémoires of Hadrien* in the present chapter. But it is interesting to see how in other parts of her work as well Yourcenar stresses both the diversity and the exclusive universality of Greece. For example, in her short 1936 essay ‘À quelqu’un qui me demandait si la pensée grecque vaut encore pour nous’, which was re-published, and therefore re-endorsed, in 1970, she compares Greece with China, a parallel system of universal values.

[De] même que la Grèce, [la Chine] a su formuler au cours des siècles *toutes les vues possibles* sur la métaphysique et la vie, le social et le sacré, et offrir aux problèmes de la condition humaine des solutions variées, convergeantes ou parallèles, ou souvent diamétralement opposées, entre lesquelles l’esprit peut choisir. Grecques comme chinoises, *leur valeur, comme celle d’une équation algébrique, demeure inchangée*, quelles que soient les réalités particulières auxquelles chaque génération l’applique.<sup>6</sup>

Here the paradoxical meaning of diversity is revealed in all its philosophical breadth and historical narrowness. As it becomes clear from the italicized parts, Yourcenar thinks that each of the Greek and the Chinese perspectives covers sufficiently all possible areas of experience and offers interpretations which can be applied in all historical situations with invariable effectiveness. As always, Yourcenar’s point should not be misconstrued as the expression of a simple nostalgia for the antiquity or even as an underestimation of the complexity and the mystery of ‘the human condition’. If anything, it is the outcome of her extensive study and knowledge of

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<sup>6</sup> *EM*, p. 431, my emphasis. This essay appears as part of a larger essay which Yourcenar entitled ‘Grèce et Sicile’, and which is included in her collection *En pèlerin et en étranger* (1989).

Greek poetry and art. Nevertheless, even allowing for the broadest interpretation, this approach betrays her reluctance or inability to consider situations that remain at the margin of these ‘universal’ frames of reference, or wholly outside them.<sup>7</sup>

Once more, I would like to discuss the aesthetic references in the above passage, as I believe that it is the aesthetic factor which gives such breadth to Yourcenar’s perspective, while at the same time enclosing and limiting it. In her effort to emphasize the diversity of the Greek and Chinese solutions available to modern man, Yourcenar uses the example of different geometrical figures - parallel and convergent lines and the circle, conveying the ideas of sequence, identity and opposition. These aesthetic analogies suggest and determine an imaginary area within which ideas may only be part of comprehensible structures, even if things themselves are not. This eminently Greek representation leaves one wondering as to whether *all* possible ‘problems’ or situations accept such interpretations, as Yourcenar seems to suggest.

If we now return to *Mémoires d’Hadrien*, we shall see that the discourse of the universality and vast inclusiveness of Greek thinking is here reiterated in terms of Greek art. In the chapter entitled ‘Tellus stabilita’, where the discussion of *construire* and *reconstruire* is also to be found, we read Hadrien’s meditation on the visual arts of his time. It is specified that by the word art Hadrien means Greek art: ‘notre art (j’entends celui des Grecs).’<sup>8</sup> In the following passage, the domain of the arts is represented as a sphere, another geometrical shape, which draws attention to its perfection and inclusiveness, while at the same time excluding all that lies outside of it:

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<sup>7</sup> Yourcenar makes a similar point in *Souvenirs pieux* (EM, p. 875): ‘J’ai cru vers ma vingtième année [...] que la réponse grecque aux questions humaines était la meilleure, sinon la seule. J’ai compris plus tard qu’il n’y avait pas de réponse grecque, mais une série de réponses venues des Grecs *entre lesquelles il faut choisir*.’ Notice how Yourcenar radicalizes here, as in the passage quoted above, an otherwise perfectly acceptable argument, by adding the last phrase which I have emphasized. *Souvenirs Pieux* is the first part of Yourcenar’s autobiographical trilogy, *Le Labyrinthe du monde*. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Souvenirs Pieux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974).

<sup>8</sup> OR, p. 388.

Notre art est parfait, c'est-à-dire accompli, mais sa perfection est susceptible de modulations aussi variées que celles d'une voix pure : à nous de jouer ce jeu habile qui consiste à se rapprocher ou à s'éloigner perpétuellement de cette solution trouvée une fois pour toutes, d'aller jusqu'au bout de la rigueur ou de l'excès, d'enfermer d'innombrables constructions nouvelles à l'intérieur de cette belle sphère.<sup>9</sup>

This is a problematic assertion regardless of whether emperor Hadrian, the historical subject of the book, had a similar view of art and the future of art. What needs to be interrogated is rather a perception of Greek art which is also present in Yourcenar's critical essays and which is here expressed through Hadrien's reduction of all possible artistic diversity into an original Greek archetype. The ideas of artistic *rigueur* and *excès* may be construed as specific references, respectively, to 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup>-Century European art, and to aspects of modern art, especially surrealism. Whether this is so or not, Greek art and thought appears to be for Yourcenar the archetype of universality and the measure of all originality, at least as far as Western culture is concerned.

This situation has major implications for the principle of *reconstruire*, which sums up Yourcenar's innovative determination of representation. While she spends a large part of her criticism and fictional work arguing that true art can only be reconstruction and acceptance of the past, her argument seems to be anchored in a more fundamental concept of artistic originality that escapes philosophical and aesthetic revisionism. Even if we accept that Greek art and thought bear the mark of authenticity, in that they offer us a comprehensive report of the human condition in all its facticity and finiteness, does it follow that this art and thought represent the human subject in an exclusive and inevitable way? Would this not amount to saying that total representation has been possible at least once in history and that it is only we, the descendants of this classicism (including Hadrien), who suffer the ironic effect of time? The philosophical inferences of these questions are indeed easy to draw. Greek thought and art are here represented not as the absolute answer to the

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<sup>9</sup> *OR*, p. 388.

question of existence, but as the sum of all possible formulations of this question. The thought of Being is possible not through metaphysical reduction but through the different and exhaustive ways in which the Greek people opened themselves up to the question of existence. It certainly seems that the thought of Being which always escapes modern man has been identified by Yourcenar specifically with Greek thought and aesthetics.

### Modernity and political aestheticism in Yourcenar

Keeping this conclusion in mind, let us now turn to Yourcenar's political aestheticism in its relation to contemporary perceptions of politics and aesthetics in the West. This question has been tackled with some subtlety by Erin G. Carlston in *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity*, to which I referred in Chapter 3. Carlston's argument is that, while speaking as a political and cultural liberalist, Yourcenar used reactionary ideological categories in a way that aligns her with the antimodernist writings of Spengler, Barrès and Maurras, and even with the flawed (in the writer's opinion) analysis of fascism by Croce and Arendt.<sup>10</sup> To support her claim, Carlston examines especially 'Diagnostic de l'Europe' and *Denier du rêve*, and exposes some conservative-elitist aspects of Yourcenar's attitude towards gender, sexuality, ethnicity, politics and culture.

While I believe that Carlston is too quick to accuse Yourcenar of serious political and ethical failures, including sexism and racism, her general conclusion and some of her specific insights are not without interest. They show how the conflict between universality and irreducible individuality in Yourcenar, as it has been

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<sup>10</sup> Erin G. Carlston, *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 87.

identified in the present thesis, can be perceived as deep-seated intellectual hesitation or, even worse, as a form of duplicity, symptomatic of the crisis of political liberalism. Carlston touches the heart of the matter when she identifies ‘Yourcenar’s commitment to the Hellenic and Enlightenment traditions’ as the root of what comes out as an ambivalent discourse of totality and humanism.<sup>11</sup> Her overall conclusion refers to both Yourcenar and Arendt:

[T]heir uncritical commitment to the Enlightenment’s aesthetic, ethical, and political values in turn allies them *bon gré mal gré* with the ethnocentric and ultimately racist concept of European culture that also subtends certain fascist ideologies.<sup>12</sup>

As far as Yourcenar is concerned, this is a fascinating statement in need of more detailed investigation. In line with my research here, I would highlight the relationship which Carlston points out between Yourcenar’s aestheticism and the aesthetic ideology of fascism.

Carlston quotes (in English) from *Les Yeux ouverts* Yourcenar’s response to Mussolini’s fascism, which she had witnessed during her visits to Rome in 1932-33, and which led to the first version of *Denier du rêve*, in 1934. ‘Le fascisme me paraissait grotesque ; j’avais vu la marche sur Rome : des messieurs « de bonne famille », suants sous leurs chemises noires, et des gens sur lesquels on tapait, parce qu’ils n’étaient pas d’accord. Cela ne m’avait pas paru beau.’<sup>13</sup> Carlston is surprised that Yourcenar’s immediate reaction to the oppressive regime is summarized in an aesthetic judgement (‘grotesque’, ‘beau’). She writes that Yourcenar’s ‘resistance to fascism’s coercive, totalitarian aspect is an afterthought, something “*de plus*”’.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Carlston, p. 125.

<sup>12</sup> Carlston, p. 134.

<sup>13</sup> *Les Yeux ouverts*, p. 87, quoted in English in Carlston, p. 111.

<sup>14</sup> Carlston, p. 111. Strictly speaking, it is not fascism, but politics in general, that Yourcenar sees with primarily aesthetic criteria, as I have been arguing in the present thesis. Thus, in *Le Coup de grâce* (1939), Yourcenar’s next novel after *Denier du rêve*, communism is also depicted as an aesthetic choice. The reason why Sophie, the aristocrat main female character of the novel, is a communist sympathizer is specified primarily in aesthetic terms: ‘Sophie cachait à peine ses sympathies pour les rouges : pour un cœur comme le sien, *l’élégance suprême* était évidemment de donner raison à l’ennemi.’ *OR*, p. 107, my emphasis.

Further down, she quotes the following phrase from Yourcenar's most openly anti-fascist essay, 'Forces du passé et forces de l'avenir': 'Et certes, nul ne conteste qu'il y ait de la beauté dans l'exaltation passionnée de tel jeune nazi et dans son sacrifice total à son chef bien-aimé.'<sup>15</sup> According to Carlston, the fact that Yourcenar has an eye for the beauty of the Nazi sentiment is a sign not so much of her susceptibility to Nazi ideology, but of her inability 'entirely to divorce her criticism of fascism from the categories of fascist thought'.<sup>16</sup> Carlston criticizes Yourcenar for failing to see not only that aesthetics is a basic category of fascist politics, but also that the Greek aesthetic ideal, which she embraces unconditionally as the source reference of all representation, is in fact at the origin of National-Socialist aestheticism.

The implication, in much of [Yourcenar's] work, that Greece is the centre and the source of civilization reminds us of Winckelmann's argument that only the Greek or European type achieves beauty, and that countries distant from Greece, in their climate and soil as well as their culture, produce human and natural deviations from the aesthetic ideal. That idea helped [...] to support both homosexual aestheticism and Nazism's racist aesthetic ideology.<sup>17</sup>

These conclusions, tentative as they remain in Carlston's essay, help to lend concrete historical context to the problematic relationship between politics, aesthetics and the Greek paradigm in the work of Yourcenar, and especially in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*. Having suggested that Hadrien's politics is an act of representation with Rome as its subject and Greece as its model, the question is how this political aestheticism relates to political modernity of which fascism is a symptom and possibility. It would of course be pointless to ask whether Hadrien is a fascist figure or, for that matter, whether Yourcenar espouses too many fascist ideologemes, *pace* Carlston's aphorisms.<sup>18</sup> Rather, I would ask in what ways the rebirth and political

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<sup>15</sup> *EM*, p. 463, quoted in English in Carlston, p. 114. Carlston does not quote the end of this phrase: '...même si cette exaltation et ce sacrifice portent en eux leur poison.' 'Forces du passé et forces de l'avenir' was included in Yourcenar's posthumous collection *En pèlerin et en étranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> Carlston, p. 111.

<sup>17</sup> Carlston, p. 121.

<sup>18</sup> Carlston does not shrink from calling Yourcenar a racist and an anti-Semite, which she certainly was not either as a writer or as a person (see especially Carlston, 114ff.) This certainly weakens the grip of

fulfilment of Rome, which Yourcenar envisions in *Mémoires*, follows a specifically Western aesthetic model of self-creation which represses, rather than respects, difference. Beyond the tags of racism, and sexism, I would also propose to identify those forms of humanity or subjectivity in this novel which remain foreign to this aesthetic model and are therefore perceived as less human.

### National aestheticism: Lacoue-Labarthe

One of the most enlightening studies on the philosophical and historical implications of modern political aestheticism is Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's *La Fiction du politique*.<sup>19</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe begins by questioning Heidegger's involvement with the Nazi regime and examines his political thought to see how it allowed for such an eventuality. In the process, he draws some interesting conclusions about the nature of fascism and Nazism, their historical origins and emblematic manifestation in Germany, and their relationship with Greek politics and art. Thus *La Fiction du politique* is relevant to my thesis in two interconnected ways. First, it will help illuminate the historical and philosophical context in which the dominant idea of politics as representation in *Mémoires d'Hadrien* has its roots. Second, it will show whether the affinity of existential thought between Yourcenar and Heidegger extends to their aesthetico-political theories as well.

Like Carlston, Lacoue-Labarthe traces the European ideal of the aesthetic formation of the community back to Winckelmann's re-discovery of Greece.<sup>20</sup> The

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Carlston's otherwise valid argument that the concepts of race and Jewishness in Yourcenar's work are problematic. I shall expand on this issue at a subsequent point of this chapter.

<sup>19</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique : Heidegger, l'art et la politique* (Strasbourg: Association des Publications près les Universités de Strasbourg, 1987). In my analysis I have also been using the English translation of this book, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*, trans. by Chris Turner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, pp. 58 and 59.

Greek idea of beautiful corporeality is equated in Winckelmann with that of spirituality. This equation is then taken over by Hegel who translates it into the unity of nature and spirit, of subject and object, in the total work of art which is the State.<sup>21</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe argues that this idea was central to the quest for a unique national and spiritual identity by the German Romantics and Idealists alike and is still strongly present in Nietzsche. Despite the profound differences between Hegel's and Nietzsche's determinations of the political,

l'un comme l'autre, s'agissant des Grecs, ont identifié le politique à l'esthétique et [...] une telle identification est au départ de *l'agôn* mimétique où l'un comme l'autre (mais beaucoup d'autres avec eux, et à vrai dire pratiquement tous jusqu'à Heidegger compris) ont vu l'unique chance pour l'Allemagne de pouvoir s'identifier et de parvenir à l'existence.<sup>22</sup>

Some of the main themes of Lacoue-Labarthe's thesis are present in this statement. They include the historical need felt by the German people for the formation of a national identity; the choice of Greece as not simply the historical source of the values that could inspire this process, but the model according to which the formation of national identity could be achieved; and, consequently, the adoption by Germany up to the Second World War of a mimetic logic which, as Lacoue-Labarthe explains, led to exhaustion and disaster. The other basic claims that inform his study are, firstly, that Heidegger's philosophy was the only one capable of seeing through this dialectic of identity, while at the same time Heidegger himself enigmatically submitted his political thought to it and allied with the Nazi party; and secondly and most relevantly to my thesis, that aestheticism, transposed to the level of the political, led to the outbreak of violence and extermination. I will discuss very briefly Lacoue-Labarthe's notion of national aestheticism, as it concerns my research on Yourcenar's political aestheticism and highlights the difficulties involved in thinking the political subject (for Yourcenar: Europe; for Heidegger: the *Volk*) in terms of the work of art.

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<sup>21</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>22</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, p. 59.



For Lacoue-Labarthe, the Romantic and modern notion of politics as a form of plastic art derives from the German reception of Greece as the topos of art *par excellence*. Central to the Greek perception of art, of education and of the formation of the City is the concept of mimesis and its Platonic and Aristotelian determinations. According to Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of Heidegger, mimesis in ancient Greece is defined as mimesis of *physis*, a process by which nature reveals itself to man. This process is *technè*, art and technique, understood not as autonomous creation, but as the organic development and extension of *physis*. In this sense, human artefacts, including the City itself, are not original creations, but manifestations of the natural and organic relationship between nature and man. In terms of the political, this means that nature reveals itself as knowledge to the community through art, including in the broadest sense of linguistic representation. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, this process is still fundamental to the definition of the modern political subject, the nation.

L'organicité essentielle du politique est [...] l'organicité du peuple, du *Volkstum*, que notre concept de « nation », si on le restitue à son sens premier, rend assez bien en ce qu'il fait signe vers une détermination naturelle ou « physique » de la communauté que seule peut accomplir et révéler à elle-même une *technè*, – si ce n'est la *technè* elle-même, l'art, à commencer par le langage (la langue). Si la *technè* peut se définir comme le sur-croît de la *physis*, par lequel la *physis* se « décrypte » et se présente – si donc on peut dire la *technè* comme *apophantique*, au sens aristotélico-heideggerien du terme –, l'*organicité* politique est le surcroît nécessaire à la présentation et à la reconnaissance de soi d'une nation. Et telle est la fonction politique de l'art.<sup>23</sup>

*Technè* is 'apophantic' in that it shows forth ('apo-phainein') *physis* in itself, and defines the *polis* not as 'une formation artificielle ou conventionnelle', but as 'la « belle formation » spontanément jaillie du « génie d'un peuple » (le génie grec)'.<sup>24</sup>

However, the Greek perception of art as mimesis is complicated by the Platonic determination of Being as Idea. The Idea serves as the axiomatic *paradeigma*, that is, as the model of the mimetic process. In the Platonic scheme, mimesis is no longer

<sup>23</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, p. 60.

<sup>24</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, p. 58.

mimesis of nature, but of a posited single origin devoid of any facticity. In art, the quest for truth - for what Heidegger called *alētheia*, unconcealment of *physis* - is supplanted by the quest for identity between the Idea and the thing, the work of art and what it represents. *Technè* is no longer thought as a supplement to nature. In seeking to efface its difference from *physis*, the work of art claims its autonomy and art becomes the domain of pure creativity. As a result, the subject, itself understood as a work of art, also loses its mimetic (and, consequently, differential) relation to *physis* and obeys to what Lacoue-Labarthe calls a typology of being. The subject becomes a type and belongs to a race, a nation and so on. Lacoue-Labarthe calls this process 'le *fictionnement* des êtres et des communautés'.<sup>25</sup> On the basis of this understanding of mimesis as original creativity and of the political subject as a fictionalized copy of an ideal Form, Romantic Germany entered into a mimetic *agon*, whose objective, Lacoue-Labarthe argues, was the formation of a unique and authentic national and political identity.

Importantly for my thesis, Lacoue-Labarthe clarifies that, while the aesthetic constitution of the political was revealed to us through the vicissitudes of German history, the historical process of the mimetic reproduction of the Greek paradigm is common to the rest of Western European nations.

La rivalité agonistique (et par conséquent mimétique) avec l'Ancien n'est évidemment pas réservée à la seule Allemagne. Elle est en général fondatrice du politique moderne, étant tout simplement l'invention du Moderne même, c'est-à-dire de ce qui surgit dans l'époque de la « délégitimation » des théocraties chrétiennes. Depuis la Renaissance, l'Europe tout entière est la proie de l'Antique et c'est l'*imitatio* qui règle la construction du Moderne.<sup>26</sup>

Entering an era of delegitimation, Western Europe sought a model of self-grounded identity in Greek aesthetics and emphasized the political function of art. This situation made historically possible what Benjamin in the Artwork essay and Brecht

<sup>25</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, p. 71, emphasis in the original.

<sup>26</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, p. 68.

called the aestheticization of politics in fascism.<sup>27</sup> Fascism is here explained as the radicalization of the Western misinterpretation of mimesis as the *imitatio* of a single origin. It is an attempt at reproducing not simply the Greek example of the political aesthetic, but the hypothetical Greek awakening of man into history. Lacoue-Labarthe argues convincingly that ‘ce que cherche l’*imitatio* allemande dans la Grèce c’est le modèle [...] d’un pur surgissement, d’une pure originalité : le modèle d’une auto-formation’.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, Nazism aspired to establish a totally new mythical beginning for itself, and exhausted itself - together with the entire aesthetico-political project of classical *imitatio* - in the effort to mould the Nazi *Volk* into the total work of art. In effect, the aesthetic *moulding* of the people - a word which translates the Greek *plassein* (whence ‘plastic arts’) and relates semantically to the Latin  *fingere*  - gives Lacoue-Labarthe’s study its title and main thesis: ‘La *fiction* du politique’. Fascism, he argues, is the absolute fictionalizing of the political subject as the all-embracing work of art. And this total fiction, Lacoue-Labarthe points out, is film.<sup>29</sup> Film as the total artefact is an idea that Benjamin understood very well, and which Yourcenar also sensed to a considerable extent, as we saw in Chapter 3.

In this context, to define fascism and Nazism as forms of national aestheticism is to suggest that they are the consummation and not the temporary abandonment or negation of modern European politics. Indeed, Lacoue-Labarthe specifies that the extermination of the Jews ‘est à l’égard de l’Occident la terrible révélation de son essence’.<sup>30</sup> Even more controversially, he also claims that ‘le nazisme est un humanisme’, in so far as man is at its centre as the self-created transcendental subject.<sup>31</sup> These bold statements do not reduce modern politics to variations of

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<sup>27</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, p. 53. See also Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, p. 235.

<sup>28</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, p. 69.

<sup>29</sup> On the issue of film as the total artwork, see especially Lacoue-Labarthe, pp. 54-58.

<sup>30</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, p. 38. I will return to the issue of the extermination further down in the chapter.

<sup>31</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, p. 81.

fascism, but they do mean that the political in the West is essentially metaphysical. Political aestheticism posits both the possibility of absolute beginning, supposedly initiated by the Greeks, and the possibility of (national) identity, which was pursued by the Moderns.

From an ontological point of view, the metaphysical character of the political aesthetic, as Lacoue-Labarthe discusses, is asserted by the fact that a subject is always anterior to the modern mimetic process, rather than its result. The identity of the self, the political identity of Europe or that of the *Volk* are always represented in advance, rather than produced in the course of mimesis. In an anti-Hegelian statement, Lacoue-Labarthe writes that the dialectics of mimesis thus understood is ‘une eschatologie de l’identique ; et tant que cette logique [...] sous-tendra l’interprétation de la *mimèsis*, on ne pourra qu’indéfiniment circuler du même à l’autre – sous l’autorité du même’.<sup>32</sup> If this self-positing identity pre-conceives Being as the unique subject of a violent and exclusive humanism, it also creates the stereotypes that lead to racism and extermination.

Lacoue-Labarthe proceeds to imagine a new ‘mimetologic’ which takes into account the ‘originary secondarity’ of the subject or, to recall the term that Derrida coined for Lacoue-Labarthe’s use, its *désistance*.<sup>33</sup> This mimetologic avoids the classical interpretation of mimesis as *imitatio*, that is, the pursuit of identity on the basis of a single model or origin. The interesting thing about this new mimetologic is that it proposes a ‘subject’ which bears expressly the characteristics of Dasein, with the sole difference that its infirmity and impropriety are emphasized. Having described the ex-static, improper and open character of this subject, Lacoue-Labarthe concludes:

C’est bien ce qu’ « est » le *Da-sein* heideggerien. Mais cette (dé)constitution extatique est à penser elle-même comme défaut ou comme insuffisance – selon une

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<sup>32</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>33</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, pp. 72-73.

pensée stricte de la finitude. Le sujet est originairement l'infirmité du sujet, et cette infirmité est son intimité même, en déhiscence.<sup>34</sup>

Here, Lacoue-Labarthe pushes the economy of Heidegger's argument to its limits, suggesting at the same time that Heidegger had not done so sufficiently - and in any case, not when it mostly mattered. Perhaps because he has the benefit of hindsight, by which I mean the knowledge of the extermination, Lacoue-Labarthe emphasizes the infirmity of the 'subject' in a way that Heidegger, with his idea of the authentically resolute Dasein, did not manage to do. At the same time, Lacoue-Labarthe stresses that the impropriety of the subject should not in turn be considered 'comme un sujet ou un suppôt', an error which Yourcenar, due to her universalizing tendency, has not always managed to avoid.<sup>35</sup>

Lacoue-Labarthe's mimetologic is thoroughly indebted to Heidegger, as is his entire analysis of the aestheticization of politics, even as Heidegger's political thought is criticized forcefully for not being consistent with his philosophy. It is in Heidegger's philosophy that Lacoue-Labarthe finds the beginning of an understanding of the subject that avoids the perilous reduction of subjectivity into imaginary types and identities: the German, the Greek, the Jew. This subject, claims Lacoue-Labarthe, was already richly delineated as Dasein in *Being and Time*. But when it came to situating this subject within the German historico-political context, as in *Introduction to Metaphysics* and his infamous 1933 Rectoral Address, then Heidegger decided to concretize and reduce this subject along the lines of the mythicized self-creation of the German *Volk*.<sup>36</sup> Let us recall here Paul Ricœur's

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<sup>34</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, pp. 71-72.

<sup>35</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, p. 71.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, (New Haven & London: Yale Nota Bene, 2000). *Introduction to Metaphysics* was first published as *Einführung in die Metaphysik* in 1953, on the basis of lectures of 1935.

The historical specifics of Heidegger's political involvement need not interest us here. For a thoroughly researched biographical account, see Hugo Ott's *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life*, trans. by Allan Blunden, (Fontana Press: London, 1994). Among the many reference books in English on the 'Heidegger affair', Richard Wolin (ed.), *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993) contains key texts by Heidegger, including 'The Self-Assertion of the German University', as well as testimonies and interpretations by Heidegger's colleagues and pupils, including

accurate diagnosis of the difficulties facing the attempt to project individual fate onto historical destiny, to which I referred in Chapter 4.

For his part, Lacoue-Labarthe locates the problem in Heidegger's idea, during his Nazi years, that the work of art is not the differential representation of nature, but the means by which Being (*physis* or nature) manifests itself beyond difference and representation. Lacoue-Labarthe highlights Heidegger's unexpected Platonic 'condemnation of mimesis':<sup>37</sup> by excluding mimesis, that is, difference in representation, as if *physis* could be fully present in man's works, Heidegger hypothesized a state of original unity between man and nature, in much the same way as Plato did. Heidegger's political thought thus authorized the search for a new political identity, which, he believed, found its historical actualization in Nazi Germany. As we shall see, this way of arriving at a concept of identity which transcends difference presents certain similarities with the idea that the *acceptance* of difference and contingency may lead to the formation of the universal subject of humanism. For this reason, it is worth pursuing Heidegger's thinking on art and representation a little further.

In his idiosyncratic interpretation of the first choral ode from Sophocles' *Antigone* ('*polla ta deina kouden anthrôpou deinoteron pelei...*', lines 332-275), Heidegger states that 'Art is knowing and hence is *technè*'.<sup>38</sup> This idea, which Lacoue-Labarthe considers as central to both German Idealism and Romanticism, assumes a specific meaning in Heidegger. If nature reveals itself as knowledge to man, it is not because the work of art reflects or simply resembles nature. It is rather because through the inexorable undoing of human constructions, nature reveals itself

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Karl Löwith and Jürgen Habermas. For a comprehensive approach which takes into account the interaction between the poetic, the historical, the political and the philosophical elements in Heidegger, see Miguel de Beistegui, *Heidegger and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1998). Lacoue-Labarthe's *La Fiction du politique*, which I am discussing here, is also a good, if unsystematic, source of information on this issue.

<sup>37</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, p. 67-68.

<sup>38</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 170.

in its overwhelming power. In this schema of things, the artist exerts violence over nature in full awareness and expectation of the eventual destruction of his works. History is then defined as the confirmation of the ‘overwhelming’ - the catastrophic outcome of the conflict between man and nature. Concluding his commentary, Heidegger writes:

In [artistic success], the violence-doer as creator sees only a seeming fulfillment, which is to be despised. In willing the unprecedented, the violence-doer casts aside all help. For such a one, disaster is the deepest and broadest Yes to the overwhelming. In the shattering of the wrought work, in knowing that the work is un-fit and *sarma* (dungheap), the violence doer leaves the overwhelming to its fittingness. [...] The overwhelming, Being, confirms itself in works as history.<sup>39</sup>

In this passage, it is noteworthy that the ‘violence-doer as creator’ acknowledges and *accepts* disaster, thus cooperating with the ‘overwhelming’, even at the cost of the permanence of his creation. Leaving aside (if at all possible) the vehemence and masculine ardour of Heidegger’s expression, we notice that art contains ‘the deepest and broadest Yes’, an act of knowing cooperation with nature, of embracing and prolonging the conflict through which the truth of Being becomes manifest. However, what is still not acceptable in Heidegger’s thinking of art is the *hybris* of ‘willing the unprecedented’, that is, the call to initiate and master this process. It is for his political belief in the possibility of a totally new and autonomous beginning which repeats the genius of Greek *technè* that Lacoue-Labarthe mostly criticizes Heidegger.

The extreme language of *Introduction to Metaphysics* and the concomitant desire for mastery are softened in another essay on *technè*, ‘The Question Concerning Technology’.<sup>40</sup> In this essay, Heidegger is concerned with the modern shift from art

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<sup>39</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 174.

<sup>40</sup> *Introduction to Metaphysics* is based on lectures given in 1935, that is, at the apex of Heidegger’s Nazi years. ‘The Question Concerning Technology’ is based on a lecture of 1953, that is, after the war and the dissolution of the Nazi party (it was published in 1954, as ‘Die Frage nach der Technik’). The difference in tone between these two works reflects both the dramatic change of scenery in German history in the space of ten years, and Heidegger’s fall from grace in post-war German academic circles. Martin Heidegger, ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 311-341.

to technology (a central theme in both Benjamin's 'The Work of Art' essay and Yourcenar's 'Diagnostic de l'Europe'), and attempts to clarify the distinct ontological status of each of these terms. His aim is no longer to awaken Germany into a spiritual beginning, although he still draws from the Greek perception of art as a way of 'bringing forth' the truth of Being (*alētheuein*). His overall point in this essay is that modern technology disturbs the original unity between man and nature, which was traditionally expressed through art, and prevents Being from manifesting itself in man's artefacts.

Heidegger observes that in Greek the word *technè* covers both technology and art. Like art, 'Technology is a mode of revealing. Technology comes to presence in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where *alētheia*, truth, happens'.<sup>41</sup> This means that, for the Greeks, technology (e.g. building construction) is not an effort to give form to nature, but an expression of cooperation between man and nature. Man gives form to his constructions, but that which endures, Heidegger writes, is 'what is granted' to man. Permanence is not in the form, but in the way constructions 'hold sway, administer themselves, develop, and decay – the way they essentially "unfold"'.<sup>42</sup> The artist does not impose any conceptual description on nature; he rather opens the way for nature to disclose itself in the artwork or the construction.

The discourse in *Introduction to Metaphysics* of an originary and indefinite manifestation of nature beyond any representation is repeated here. Heidegger writes that 'It is as revealing, and not as manufacturing, that *technè* is bringing-forth'.<sup>43</sup> In other words, art is a way for Being unreservedly to manifest itself in the artefact, as the collaboration between nature and man; technology, in the modern sense of

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<sup>41</sup> Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', p. 319.

<sup>42</sup> Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', pp. 335, 336.

<sup>43</sup> Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', p. 319.



manufacturing, attempts to disturb this relationship with the result that nothing is revealed, apart from man's desire for mastery.

Modern technology, according to Heidegger, attempts to impose permanence on nature. If the essence of technology in the traditional sense is in revealing, its essence in the modern sense is in *Ge-stell*, that is, in 'enframing', ordering and quantifying nature. In modernity, creation is no longer co-operation, but manipulation and objectification of *physis*, which now recedes behind subjective representations. 'Enframing', Heidegger writes, 'blocks the shining forth and holding sway of truth'.<sup>44</sup> This is why modern technology is 'mysterious' and what it reveals is 'danger': the danger of Being's definite concealment. With reference to this essay by Heidegger and in the context of her commentary on *La Fiction du politique*, Joan Brandt writes:

Modern technology and its mode of revealing, which is Enframing, thus become a debased form of *technè*, a decline into subjectness and representationality. [...] For Heidegger, then, technology in its original sense as a primordial belonging together of man and Being, or of *technè* and *physis*, has not yet been contaminated by the mimetic.<sup>45</sup>

Echoing Lacoue-Labarthe, Brandt questions Heidegger's hypothesis of an original purity in the relationship between man and Being, prior to any representation. All the more so, as it was Heidegger who first pointed out that it is of the essence of Being not to be full presence but self-concealment. We may recall at this point that ecstatic Dasein was described by Heidegger as the *Lichtung*, the clearing, in which Being shows itself not as presence, but as dynamic absence.<sup>46</sup> Being's concealment is therefore not a consequence of modern technology, but the way Being confirms itself through all *technè*, ancient or modern. Modern technology does not deny Being, as Heidegger believes in his writing on *technè*; on the contrary, by foregrounding the

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<sup>44</sup> Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', p. 333.

<sup>45</sup> Joan Brandt, *Geopoetics: The Politics of Mimesis in Poststructuralist French Poetry and Theory*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 193.

<sup>46</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 171.

mimetic character of representation, technology makes us aware of the illusory character of ‘art’. Let us remember here that Benjamin had reached this conclusion already in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, showing how film deprives the traditional artefact from its aura (Chapter 3 of the present thesis).

It is therefore untenable to suggest, as Heidegger does in his writing on *technè*, that Greece represented an original unity between Being and man, and that a new beginning towards that unity is possible, either for Nazi Germany or for post-war Western Europe. Lacoue-Labarthe claims that the effort to ground philosophically the possibility of a new beginning was not abandoned by Heidegger even after the war, when he concentrated on Hölderlin’s poetry and on language in general. Heidegger’s ‘exclusion brutale de la *mimèsis* l’avait laissé à son insu prisonnier d’une mimétologie au fond traditionnelle, c’est-à-dire platonicienne’.<sup>47</sup> By excluding difference in representation in the same way as Plato did, it became possible for Heidegger to subscribe to a form of political aestheticism embraced also by the Nazis, and to envision together with them a fictional future for Germany as the total work of art.

## Between existential authenticity and political aestheticism

Let us now return to *Mémoires d’Hadrien* and attempt to re-think Yourcenar’s quest for authenticity in relation to her aesthetic perception of politics. Lacoue-Labarthe’s problematization of the relationship between the two helps understand Yourcenar’s political aestheticism in its characteristically modern dimensions. For it appears that, not unlike Heidegger, she also believed that the formation of a new authentic European identity was possible beyond mimesis and difference; this identity was also

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<sup>47</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, p. 74.

thoroughly inspired by the example of Greek aesthetics and philosophy; and finally, this identity was based on an imaginary configuration of the political subject, Rome, as something that could develop into the absolute work of art, as I will attempt to demonstrate. Thus Yourcenar would appear to use the same ambivalent political discourse as Heidegger. On the one hand she insists that it is not possible to escape representational structures, which is why she constantly suggests that the subject be thought authentically in its original difference and infirmity. On the other hand, she refers to Greece to support the idea that Europe can be moulded into a total work of art which transcends representation, thus reverting to the traditional concept of authenticity as original creativity.

To be sure, there is no underestimating the differences between Yourcenar's and Heidegger's approaches to political subjectivity and their respective perceptions of art (let alone the fact that these perceptions and approaches varied, at least for Yourcenar, through the years). To begin with, Yourcenar would never call for a violent political beginning, as Heidegger did in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Indeed the political objective of Hadrien in *Mémoires* is the pacification of the empire. This may reflect the fact that the writing of *Mémoires* began in earnest four years after the war, while the *Introduction to Metaphysics* was first presented as a lecture course four years before it. In pre-war Nazi Germany it was more possible for Heidegger to express in violent terms the idea of destruction as a manifestation of Being than it was in his later essays on language and poetry. Nonetheless, one cannot help noticing how well Yourcenar's idea of the relationship between the artist, the authentic work of art and time – an idea illustrated in *Mémoires* and further explained in 'Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur' – is served by Heidegger's statement: 'disaster is the deepest and broadest Yes to the overwhelming'. Only the unsavoury register of Heidegger's patriotic flair separates this statement from Yourcenar's theory that the artist should accept the inevitable dismantling of his constructions and thus accept time itself ('the overwhelming'). The 'artist' – I refer here to the type of artist, poet or

writer whom Yourcenar has in mind in her essays on Piranesi, Cavafy and Thomas Mann<sup>48</sup> – is aware of the inadequacy and inauthenticity of representations and knows that time authenticates human constructions by ruining them. This is very close to what Heidegger intimates by writing that ‘in knowing that the work is un-fit and *sarma* (dungheap), the violence doer leaves the overwhelming to its fittingness’. Finally, when Yourcenar suggests that authenticity is not in the stability but in the impermanence of the ‘creation’, she mirrors Heidegger’s claim in ‘The Question Concerning Technology’ that the essence of human constructions is in the way they ‘hold sway, administer themselves, develop, and decay – the way they essentially “unfold”’. Especially in the realm of the political aesthetic, the proximity between Heidegger’s and Yourcenar’s ideas is a strong indication that she also tended to translate the notion of authenticity into essentialist terms. Even as it was clear to her that politics is a *technè* and a *technique* of accepting difference, I suggest that she saw in modernity an opportunity for Europe, clearly supported by the nihilistic conjecture at the end of the war, finally to reclaim its identity and fulfil its historical role.

In *Mémoires d’Hadrien* this would mean that Hadrien does not content himself with re-structuring the empire, as it is often repeated at those parts of the novel where his political methods and strategies are described. If we look at the paragraphs where his actual political vision for the State is presented, we shall see that the discourse of re-construction, acceptance and repetition develops alongside a parallel and contradictory discourse of permanence, stability and eternity. There is much evidence in the book supporting this claim. I will focus first on Yourcenar’s discussion of the political determinations pertaining to the city of Rome and the abstraction of its role under Hadrien.

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<sup>48</sup> ‘Le Cerveau noir de Piranèse’, ‘Présentation critique de Constantin Cavafy’, and ‘Humanisme et hermétisme chez Thomas Mann’, are included in Yourcenar’s collection *Sous bénéfice d’inventaire* (1962, also in *EM*). I referred to these essays in Chapters 1 and 2.

Yourcenar observes that, at Hadrien's time, Rome was no longer a city, but the expansion of a geopolitical representation over half the world: 'Rome n'est plus dans Rome : elle doit périr, ou s'égaliser désormais à la moitié du monde.'<sup>49</sup> The macropolitical relationship between Rome and Greece is then summarized in an interesting passage which I quote here at length:

Chaque fois que j'ai regardé de loin, au détour de quelque route ensoleillée, une acropole grecque, et sa ville parfaite comme une fleur, reliée à sa colline comme le calice à sa tige, je sentais que cette plante incomparable était limitée par sa perfection même, accomplie sur un point de l'espace et dans un segment du temps. Sa seule chance d'expansion, comme celle des plantes, était sa graine : la semence d'idées dont la Grèce a fécondé le monde. Mais Rome plus lourde, plus informe, plus vaguement étalée dans sa plaine au bord de son fleuve, s'organisait vers des développements plus vastes : la cité est devenue l'État. J'aurais voulu que l'État s'élargit encore, devint ordre du monde, ordre des choses.<sup>50</sup>

In this passage, Yourcenar explains pithily the transition from City to State as the organic development of the political subject which produces its own identity – an idea which, Lacoue-Labarthe claims, propelled Romantic Germany into political modernity, and then culminated in Nazism. It is true that, referring to Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of *la communauté désœuvrée*, Lacoue-Labarthe identifies the political subject with the basic (infra-)political unit of the *community*, rather than with that of the State, which allows him to approach better the category of *Volkstum*.<sup>51</sup> However, in the example of Rome's spatial and temporal enlargement, it is the very abstraction of the State that shows the aesthetic character of the political. In relation to nature, the State is further removed towards metaphoricity than the City, and constitutes nature's absolute conceptual representation. It is 'ordre du monde, ordre des choses'. In the same example, let us also notice that perfection by way of the political aesthetic was already reached, according to Yourcenar, in the Greek City. The City

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<sup>49</sup> OR, p. 370.

<sup>50</sup> OR, pp. 370-31.

<sup>51</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, pp. 61-62. Lacoue-Labarthe refers to Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1986).

was a miniature manifestation of the ‘belonging together’ of *technè* and *physis* in the sense that the perfection of *physis* was revealed through the Greek ‘flower’.

Now Hadrien is calling – and I suggest hearing in this Yourcenar’s own call for a new beginning for Europe – for a repetition of the same authentic happening. Only this time, the political subject will find its identity through the processes of abstraction, spatial enlargement and futural projection. Imagining Rome’s prospect as a political entity free from material concreteness, Yourcenar writes that Rome ‘échapperait à son corps de pierre ; elle se composerait du mot d’État, du mot de citoyenneté, du mot de république, une plus sûre immortalité’.<sup>52</sup> Rome would become a political identity which transcends time and space and bears such ideological characteristics as would be still desirable in the years after the Second World War and to this day. Of course, immortality is a word that Yourcenar never used with such conviction with reference to individual existence. However, in the context of political subjectivity, immortality assumes its traditional metaphysical content of the possibility of absolute presence. The political subject is immortal not because it escapes the rule of representation, but because, as State, it *becomes* total representation. As with Heidegger’s violence doer, difference is eclipsed not because it is ignored but because it is transcended, provided for in advance.

The ways difference is provided for and, consequently, done away with are clearly mentioned in the text: First, spatial difference:

Des vertus qui suffisaient pour la petite ville des sept collines auraient à s’assouplir, à se diversifier, pour convenir à toute la terre.

Then, temporal difference:

Mais toute création humaine qui prétend à l’éternité doit s’adapter au rythme changeant des grands objets naturels, s’accorder au temps des astres.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *OR*, p. 371.

<sup>53</sup> Both quotations in *OR*, p. 371.

An unmistakeable movement from the self-sufficiency of the City (Rome, ‘la petite ville des sept collines’) to the self-sufficiency of the State (Rome, ‘[une] création humaine qui prétend à l’éternité’) is described here. But if the identity of the City is local, factual and mortal, the identity of the State is universal, abstract and eternal. Hadrien can thus qualify Rome as ‘the eternal city’ (‘Rome, que j’osai le premier qualifier d’éternelle’).<sup>54</sup> His hope is that the political subject can expand temporally and spatially to cover the entire field of possible reference. In this way, the State becomes a proper name and a dream of absolute political presence. The political subject retains its uniqueness and at the same time aspires to universality.

This is the paradoxical situation which the text narrates with precision and which, I maintain, it does not sufficiently recognize as such. While Yourcenar considers Hadrien’s failure fully to represent his existence as a token of his authenticity, she also suggests that his post-ironic grasp of the possibility of total representation authenticates the political subject that he constructs.

The leader’s ability to account for the totality of space and pre-empt the agency of time is illustrated well in the references to Hadrien’s architectural work. For example, the Pantheon in Rome both represents the universe and incorporates the differential factor of time in its design:

J’avais voulu que ce sanctuaire de Tous les Dieux reproduisît la forme du globe terrestre et de la sphère stellaire, du globe où se renferment les semences du feu éternel, de la sphère creuse qui contient tout. [...] Ce temple ouvert et secret était conçu comme un cadran solaire. Les heures tourneraient en rond sur des caissons soigneusement polis par des artisans grecs.<sup>55</sup>

The Pantheon represents the synthesis of eternity and the moment, disaster and creation, nature and art. In the novel, this dialectics is further emphasized by Hadrien’s comments on the disastrous effects of time after the presentation of each of his successful architectural projects. Thus, a few paragraphs after the narrative of the

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<sup>54</sup> *OR*, p. 371.

<sup>55</sup> *OR*, p. 416.

inauguration of the Pantheon, Hadrien thinks of the future vicissitudes of Rome: ‘Je songeais aussi, avec une sorte de terreur sacrée, aux embrasements de l’avenir. Ces millions de vies passées, présentes et futures, ces édifices récents nés d’édifices anciens et suivis eux-mêmes d’édifices à naître, me semblaient se succéder dans le temps comme des vagues’.<sup>56</sup> In the same vein, after the consecration of the Olympeion, he invokes the ‘Temps dévorateur’, as I noted in Chapter 2.

Yourcenar does not suggest that Hadrien ‘wills the disaster’, therefore it is not right to say that he defies *physis* in exactly the same way as Heidegger’s violence-doer. If there is *hybris* in Hadrien’s politics, it has to be sought in the presumption that the knowledge of the anticipated disaster can be used to establish a permanent political order. Knowledge of the instability and the non-representability of the subject can lead to the acceptance of the past, to acts of repetition and re-construction and to the re-evaluation of selfhood and otherness beyond the logic of essentialism. However, this knowledge cannot be used to support the invention of any identity, existential or political, for this would constitute a relapse to the traditional, metaphysical definition of authenticity as pureness and originality. As we saw, in his essay ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’, Paul de Man warned against the dialectical formation of authenticity on the basis of the knowledge of irony. And yet, this is the lapse (*faute*) with which Lacoue-Labarthe charges Heidegger, as a political thinker.<sup>57</sup> In Chapter 2, I argued that, from an existential perspective, Yourcenar’s fictional characters avoid this lapse, inasmuch as they never reclaim a stable identity, despite their awareness of irony. This is also true for Hadrien, as an individual character. We must now recognize that, from a political perspective, *Mémoires d’Hadrien* is not immune to this charge. In this novel, awareness of irony is used as a tool for effacing difference and for consolidating a total and exclusive political identity for the empire.

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<sup>56</sup> *OR*, p. 418.

<sup>57</sup> See chapter ‘Faute’ in Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, pp. 33-40.



This ambivalence extends to the meaning of the word *gardien*, which, as I discussed in Chapter 4, is important to the novel. I suggested that, by calling Hadrien ‘guardian of the Greeks’, Yourcenar wishes to emphasize his humility and accepting attitude towards the past. This phrase intimates the idea that his authenticity and existential freedom lie not in his mastery over tradition, but in his submission to it and the repetition of its paradigm. However, in so far as Greece does not constitute simply the ‘legacy of the past’ but the limit of all tradition and the site of all truth, to be guardian involves a unique privilege which undermines the interpretation of guardianship suggested by the novel. This privilege consists in having immediate access to the truth of Being, in being able to safeguard meanings and also in assigning names to entities. There is a hubristic element in the definition of this role and this is evident throughout the novel in the prevalence of the title of master, or similar names, over that of guardian. Hadrien is called ‘Maître de Tout’, although it is clarified that he prefers the title of ‘Philellène’;<sup>58</sup> he accepts the title ‘Père de la Patrie’, but only after years of refusing it;<sup>59</sup> finally, he thinks of himself as God, but hastens to add that ‘J’étais dieu, tout simplement, parce que j’étais homme’.<sup>60</sup> It is clear that Yourcenar takes pains to undermine the principal meaning of Hadrien’s titles, so as to render them compatible with the way existential authenticity is understood in the novel. However, such terms as *maître*, *père*, and *dieu* derive from a fundamentalist logic of unity and originality and cannot be reconciled with the elusive human subject of *Mémoires d’Hadrien*. As such, they serve as further evidence of the double discourse of guardianship *and* mastery, difference *and* identity, uniqueness *and* universality that characterizes this novel.

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<sup>58</sup> OR, p. 422.

<sup>59</sup> OR, p. 414.

<sup>60</sup> OR, p. 399.

The sub-plot of Hadrien's relationship with his lover Antinoüs contains the most evident case of *hybris* in the novel. This is because Hadrien thinks of himself as 'the sad master of Antinoüs' fate', a mastery which he assumes to the extent that he creates a god out of the dead *eromenos*.<sup>61</sup> This amorous relationship is certainly significant in terms of its fictional content, that is, as a story of love and loss. In addition to this, however, it acquires a specific meaning in the context of the present discussion on Yourcenar's political aestheticism. This is because Antinoüs represents in the novel the type of subject which Hadrien aspires to 'mould' according to his aesthetico-political vision, and therefore constitutes the measure against which Hadrien's political aestheticism will be tested. Politics is understood here in its relationship with the concept of *paideia*, which involves, as Lacoue-Labarthe also underlines, an aesthetic education and aims at the formation of an identity.<sup>62</sup> Hadrien's pederastic love for Antinoüs has a strong paternal dimension and symbolizes to a certain extent the almost obsessive interest that a leader nourishes in his subjects.<sup>63</sup> But we should also understand this 'moulding' literally, in the context of Hadrien's compulsive representation of the figure of Antinoüs, especially in sculpture. 'Je réclamaï un fini parfait, une perfection pure, ce dieu qu'est pour ceux qui l'ont aimé tout être mort à vingt ans, et aussi la ressemblance exacte, la présence familière, chaque irrégularité d'un visage plus chère que la beauté'.<sup>64</sup> The narrative of this love affair – though the word love loses its ethical and emotional content in the present framework – is in fact the narrative of the sustained and even paranoid effort on the part of the 'master' to achieve authenticity and eliminate difference through

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<sup>61</sup> '[J]'étais jusqu'au bout le triste maître de son destin.' *OR*, p. 420.

<sup>62</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, p. 70.

<sup>63</sup> The mixture of the pederastic and the paternal elements is felt in many parts of the novel, when Yourcenar refers to Hadrien's feelings for Antinoüs. It becomes more pronounced after the death of the latter. When Hadrien sees a father mourning the death of his son, paternity and erotic friendship are amalgamated in the expression of his feelings: 'J'avais le sentiment de prendre sur moi cette douleur de père comme j'avais pris celle d'Hercule, celle d'Alexandre, celle de Platon, pleurant leurs amis morts.' *OR*, p. 448.

<sup>64</sup> *OR*, p. 389.

aesthetic manipulation. This is certainly at the antipodes of the perception of authenticity as acceptance of difference. Yourcenar describes some of the statues of Antinoüs which Hadrien had ordered and links Hadrien's political vision for the empire with one of them: 'Et ces petites statuettes d'argile à un sou qui ont servi à la propagande impériale : *Tellus stabilita*, le génie de la Terre pacifiée, sous l'aspect d'un jeune homme couché qui tient des fruits et des fleurs'.<sup>65</sup>

Antinoüs is chosen because he is beautiful, submissive and silent, but also because he is Greek.<sup>66</sup> However, his Greekness is attractively blemished by the fact that he comes from Asia Minor: 'Mais l'Asie avait produit sur ce sang un peu âcre l'effet de la goutte de miel qui trouble et parfume un vin pur.'<sup>67</sup> Antinoüs' animality and submissiveness, in short, the un-Greek parts of his personality, are attributed to this Asian connection. In fact, he is likened to a young dog, 'un jeune chien', 'un beau lévrier'.<sup>68</sup> In the logic of the novel, Antinoüs' figure contains both *physis* and *technè*, both the Orient and Greece, in raw form. For Hadrien, the oriental and animal part of Antinoüs represents a mystery to be brought into the 'Greek' light, rationalized, represented and cleansed. He treats the young lover as a work of art in the making. For instance, remembering how Antinoüs' face changed with time, Hadrien remarks: 'ce visage changeait comme si nuit et jour je l'avais sculpté'.<sup>69</sup> Antinoüs' suicide remains an enigma for Hadrien till the end, but the answer implied by Yourcenar is that the young lover died because no aesthetic construction can resist the agency of time. His death perfects him in the same fashion that decay authenticates the work of art and affirms the artistic intention of its creator.

To be sure, Antinoüs is also seen as a human being by Yourcenar. Thinking of his lover's death, Hadrien says: 'il était mort seul.'<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, this is a rare

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<sup>65</sup> *OR*, p. 390.

<sup>66</sup> See Yourcenar's portrait of Antinoüs through the eyes of Hadrien in *OR*, pp. 405-6.

<sup>67</sup> *OR*, p. 405.

<sup>68</sup> *OR*, p. 405.

<sup>69</sup> *OR*, p. 406.

<sup>70</sup> *OR*, p. 446.

moment in the novel. Antinoüs is mainly treated as the aesthetico-political subject whose death, perfection and authentication were constantly desired by Hadrien. The death of the young lover is presented as an artistic masterpiece: ‘le singulier chef-d’œuvre que fut son départ.’<sup>71</sup> His body suffers in the novel even as it lies dead. We learn that while it was being prepared for embalming, Hadrien could literally hold the lover’s heart in his hands. Even then, Yourcenar uses the aesthetic criterion and characterizes the dead body as ‘un atroce chef-d’œuvre’.<sup>72</sup>

It was by no means the necessity to be historically precise that guided Yourcenar to the extreme aestheticization of the figure of Antinoüs. The opposite is rather the case: the story of emperor Hadrian’s relationship with Antinoüs lends itself excellently to the fictional representation of an idea that Yourcenar had already formed earlier in her work. In *Feux*, written in 1935, she referred in analogous terms to another legendary erotic friendship, that of Achilles and Patroclus, and to the feelings of the former with regard to the death of the latter:

La haine inavouée qui dort au fond de l’amour prédisposait Achille à la tâche de sculpteur : il enviait Hector d’avoir achevé ce chef-d’œuvre ; lui seul aurait dû arracher les derniers voiles que la pensée, le geste, le fait même d’être en vie interposaient entre eux, pour découvrir Patrocle dans sa sublime nudité de mort.<sup>73</sup>

Like the relationship between Hadrien and Antinoüs, the myth of Achilles and Patroclus is interpreted by Yourcenar in terms of longing for authenticity through the effacement of difference. Like Hadrien, Achilles wishes for the death of his companion, as a means of achieving beauty and perfection. In Patroclus alive, Achilles ‘hates’ (‘la haine’) the difference between idea and reality, form and matter – a difference which is explained in unambiguous terms as *être en vie*. The same difference is conveyed in *Mémoires d’Hadrien* in terms of Antinoüs’ oriental animality. The deaths of Patroclus and Antinoüs are more authentic than their lives,

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<sup>71</sup> OR, p. 420.

<sup>72</sup> OR, p. 441.

<sup>73</sup> OR, p. 1102. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Feux* (Paris: Grasset, 1936), for the first edition.

because both figures, as ‘works of art’, are completed at the moment of their demise. Hadrien’s political-aesthetic dream is realised in the absolute immediacy of that moment. This is made perfectly clear in the phrase that Yourcenar uses as Hadrien holds his friend’s heart in his hands: ‘Toutes les métaphores retrouvaient un sens.’<sup>74</sup> Language achieves referentiality at the moment when death ensures identity.

Although the death of Antinoüs forms an integral part of Hadrien’s aesthetic project, it also fills him with unbearable sorrow. This is the sorrow of the artist who sees his creation crumble under the impact of time, *physis*, or, as Heidegger put it in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, the ‘Overwhelming’.<sup>75</sup> However, Hadrien is not a common artist whose works are pitted against time and impermanence (though he is also that - for instance, as a narrator of his ‘memoirs’). As a statesman and a leader, Hadrien is the arch-artist whose project of political authentication provides in advance for difference, death and impermanence, with an aim of transcending them. Thus Antinoüs death does not call a halt to Hadrien’s project of total representation, however deep his sorrow. On the contrary, it signals a new phase in Hadrien’s determination to aestheticize and immortalize the figure of his lover. Freed from his semi-barbarous, quasi-bestial alterity, Antinoüs’ image can now be totally purified and ‘hellenized’ through art.

Earlier in the present chapter, I quoted the phrase in *Mémoires d’Hadrien* where the interconnectedness between beauty, identity, death and Greece is acknowledged: ‘j’avais fait [d’Antinoüs] l’image même de ce pays passionné de beauté; c’en serait peut-être le dernier dieu.’<sup>76</sup> The hellenization of the political subject continues with renewed strength after its death. Yourcenar refers extensively to Hadrien’s obsessive reproduction of the effigy of Antinoüs after his death in statues, busts, medals and coins, to the erection of temples for his worship and to Antinoë, the city founded at

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<sup>74</sup> *OR*, p. 441.

<sup>75</sup> See n. 39, this chapter.

<sup>76</sup> *OR*, p. 460.

the site of his death. The deification and idealization of Antinoüs is an extravagant project which cannot be dismissed as a simple act of sadness or madness.<sup>77</sup> This project contradicts the apparent claim of the novel that freedom is to be found in godlessness, facticity and the abandonment of the quest for identity. As Hadrien becomes creator of names and attributor of meanings, freedom resumes its conventional significance as mastery, which the novel programmatically tried to subvert. Longing for truth and authenticity, but dominated by the ideas of beauty and perfection within the Greek premise, Yourcenar's political thought hovers between the acceptance of difference and the obsession with identity.

In the novel, Hadrien becomes more and more fixated on effacing the difference which accrues as time passes since Antinoüs' death: 'comme un ouvrier consciencieux s'épuise à copier un chef-d'œuvre, je m'acharnais à exiger de ma mémoire une exactitude insensée.'<sup>78</sup> This passage implies that identity is to be reached through appropriation of difference, a process effected through an excess of art. Hadrien says: 'j'exigeais un modelé plus exact des joues, là où elles se creusent insensiblement sous la tempe, un penchement plus doux du coup sur l'épaule. [...] Les plus ressemblantes de ces images m'ont accompagné partout ; il ne m'importe même plus qu'elles soient belles ou non.'<sup>79</sup> Not only is the aesthetico-political subject beyond life, it is also beyond beauty: Hadrien's objective is identity through total representation.

As a novel, *Mémoires d'Hadrien* both is and is not aware of its ambivalent discourse on identity and difference. Yourcenar certainly recognizes that the erotic relationship of Hadrien and Antinoüs is aesthetico-political in its character and is

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<sup>77</sup> Consistent with the device of subverting the meaning of words carrying a metaphysical charge, such as *maître* and *dieu*, Yourcenar attempts to belittle the importance of Antinoüs' deification. Hadrien says: 'Le culte d'Antinoüs semblait la plus folle de mes entreprises, le débordement d'une douleur qui ne concernait que moi seul' (*OR*, p. 508). However, this act cannot be dismissed as a simple *folie*, in so far as it involves the creation and attribution by Hadrien of a new essence, the deity of Antinoüs. Hadrien is no longer a manipulator of symbols but a creator of eternal values.

<sup>78</sup> *OR*, p. 446.

<sup>79</sup> *OR*, p. 464.

linked with Hadrien's project to hellenize the Barbarians. Further, it is also acknowledged that Hadrien's obsessive reproduction of the effigy of Antinoüs is a form of resistance to time, which is not consonant with the critique of conceptuality in other parts of the book. The contradiction that is inherent in Hadrien's pursuit of beauty is made forcefully clear in his devastating sense of failure as difference persists, beauty loses its significance and identity is never reached. Would it then be the case that Yourcenar is not ambivalent in her thesis, as I claim here, but represents in fiction the uncertainty that always accompanies the quest for truth; the forward and backward movement of the self between authenticity and its opposite; the impulse to resist chaotic time, even as one knows that the subject exists temporally?

There is no doubt that the expression of ambivalence in existential, philosophical and historical terms is one of Yourcenar's principal objectives. However, I would also maintain that while she succeeds in presenting Hadrien's different states of mind and the different stages of authenticity and inauthenticity through which he passes, the discourse that she uses is itself ambivalent and often self-contradictory. Let us recapitulate some of the signs of this ambivalence. Much as Yourcenar tries to minimize or qualify the significance of Hadrien's imperial titles of *maître* and *dieu*, they retain their metaphysical character and convey an aura of self-aggrandizement that transcends universal disorder and historical nihilism. While the Pantheon as an edifice negotiates with, rather than negates, time and space, it still represents a concept of universality that sublimates both this building and its builder, beyond the notion of contingency. The eventual demise of the city of Rome is predicted, but only for the purpose of confirming its essential eternity as a concept. Finally, the death of Antinoüs does not lead to the re-evaluation of Hadrien's project to re-model the empire according to the Greek archetype, but is used as a token of the greatness, authenticity and humanity of a man who is prey to passion.

Yourcenar stresses the tragic dimension of Hadrien's situation and, by extension, the tragic nature of existence and art in modernity. But she does not seriously

question the premise of her thought - the essentially Greek thought of the possibility of total representation. Contradiction, failure and decay are perceived in terms of distance from the Greek ideal. The alternative idea that European art and politics have not distanced themselves from Greece, but re-interpreted the Greek ‘project’ for their own purposes is absent from the novel. In the most pessimistic passage of *Mémoires*, known as ‘la nuit palestinienne’, Hadrien accounts for his failures by arguing that the genius of Greece has been lost and the masses cannot measure up to the nobility of his project:

Nos lettres s'épuisent ; nos arts s'endorment ; Pancratès n'est pas Homère ; Arrien n'est pas Xénophon ; quand j'ai essayé d'immortaliser dans la pierre la forme d'Antinoüs, je n'ai pas trouvé de Praxitèle. Nos sciences piétinent depuis Aristote et Archimède [...]. L'adoucissement des mœurs, l'avancement des idées au cours du dernier siècle sont l'œuvre d'une infime minorité de bons esprits ; la masse demeure ignare, féroce quand elle le peut, en tous cas égoïste et bornée, et il y a fort à parier qu'elle restera toujours telle.<sup>80</sup>

In this passage it is interesting to note how Yourcenar places the problem of decay in its appropriate context, that of Greece and Greek *technè* and *epistemè*, but fails to resolve it in terms of the same context. Instead, she has recourse to general statements about the human nature and to an elitism which remains problematic in her work, since its first public expression in ‘Diagnostic de l'Europe’. In *Mémoires*, Hadrien understands the reasons of his failure only to the extent that the novel's equivocal discourse on existence, art and politics allows him to do so. There is another, more complex aspect of his failure which Hadrien is incapable of understanding and whose existential and political implications the novel refuses to acknowledge in full. This is the failure of Rome under Hadrien's rule to hellenize the Jews.

It is not accidental that the so-called ‘nuit palestinienne’ - the moment in the novel where Yourcenar loses her faith in ‘humanity’ in a way seldom seen in her

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<sup>80</sup> OR, p. 475.



work - occurs immediately after the account of the failure of the war in Judea. It is equally fitting that the beginning and the end of Hadrien's career as army administrator are marked by two Jewish uprisings, a signal of the peripheral but determinative role of the Jews in the novel. The second of these uprisings (132-135 CE) led by two historical figures who are mentioned in the book, Bar Kochba and Rabbi Akiba, constitutes a key moment in Jewish history, which ended in devastation for both sides and the death of hundreds of thousands. In *Mémoires*, the effects of this war are described gruesomely from the point of view of Hadrien.<sup>81</sup> Here, as in other parts of the novel, there are repeated comments on the Jewish people and their relationship with Rome. Apart from the Greeks and the Romans, no other constituent people of the empire is discussed so persistently in the novel.

Judgements on the Jewish people as a whole are invariably stern, as are those referring to specific Jewish personalities, with the exception of those called by Yourcenar 'Juifs éclairés', that is, Romanized or hellenized Jews.<sup>82</sup> The Jews represent an anomaly and the risk of contagious illness for Rome. With reference to Jewish fanaticism, Yourcenar writes the phrase 'la contagion zélote' and adds: 'l'abcès juif restait localisé dans l'aride région qui s'étend entre le Jourdain et la mer ; on pouvait sans danger cautériser ce doigt malade.'<sup>83</sup> Elsewhere, the Jews are described as 'peuple méprisé et persécuté' (p. 430), 'deshérités' (p. 430), and 'aveugles' (p. 479). The question arises whether these comments and characterizations, written just after the Second World War and with public awareness of the Nazi extermination of the Jews rising, can be taken as safe signs of anti-Semitism in the author. There is no doubt that the rhetoric of the Jewish people's misery and of the danger of spiritual and political sickness which they are supposed to embody reproduces an age-old prejudice in Europe. However, nothing in the text

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<sup>81</sup> OR, pp. 471-480 passim.

<sup>82</sup> OR, p. 467.

<sup>83</sup> OR, p. 472.

amounts to specific evidence of the author's personal antipathy towards the Jewish people. If there is antipathy in this rhetoric, it concerns, in my opinion, a deeper and equally ancient misconception which is of aesthetic-political, rather than cultural-anthropological order. This misconception does not concern primarily the Jews but the idea of representation. It bears upon the Jewish prohibition to represent God in art, and by extension upon the non-aesthetic attitude of the Jews – an attitude which is referred to, but not sufficiently comprehended in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*.

By emphasizing the aesthetic dimension in Yourcenar's appreciation of Jewishness, I am not referring to the strategy of physiological misrepresentation through which anti-Jewish feeling was expressed, for instance, by the Nazis. Negative physical depictions of Jewish people are absent in this novel, and in one occasion the Jewish defenders are described as beautiful: 'je vis sortir un à un les derniers défenseurs de la forteresse, hâves, décharnés, hideux, beaux pourtant comme tout ce qui est indomptable.'<sup>84</sup> Beyond the inconclusive criteria of physical and characteriological depiction, one must rather focus on the difference in mental attitude between Hadrien, who sees beauty even in the fighters' emaciated bodies, and the Jewish people, for whom beauty and aesthetics are categories of no relevance to the Mosaic law. Hadrien is incapable of empathizing with such a radically different view of things:

La Dixième Légion Expéditionnaire a pour emblème un sanglier ; on en plaça l'enseigne aux portes de la ville, comme c'est l'usage ; la populace, peu habituée aux simulacres peints ou sculptés dont la prive depuis des siècles une superstition fort défavorable au progrès des arts, prit cette image pour celle d'un porc, et vit dans ce petit fait une insulte aux mœurs d'Israël.<sup>85</sup>

From his vantage point, Hadrien can only rationalize the prohibition of artistic representation as a superstition and, consequently, reduce those who respect it to the status of 'populace'. If Hadrien has no way of understanding the Jewish mentality,

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<sup>84</sup> OR, p. 479.

<sup>85</sup> OR, pp. 466-467.

the novel implies that it is mostly the Jews who do not make an effort to understand him. In the paragraph referring to Akiba's visit to Hadrien for negotiations in Alexandria, the old rabbi is described in terms of 'pensée forcenée', 'esprit sec'. It is specifically mentioned that he did not speak Greek.

Assisté par des interprètes, j'eus avec lui plusieurs entretiens, qui ne furent de sa part qu'un prétexte au monologue. En moins d'une heure, je me sentis capable de définir exactement sa pensée, sinon d'y souscrire ; il ne fit pas le même effort en ce qui concernait la mienne. Ce fanatique ne se doutait même pas qu'on pût raisonner sur d'autres prémisses que les siennes ; j'offrais à ce peuple méprisé une place parmi les autres dans la communauté romaine : Jérusalem, par la bouche d'Akiba, me signifiait sa volonté de rester jusqu'au bout la forteresse d'une race et d'un dieu isolés du genre humain. [...] L'ignorance d'Akiba, son refus d'accepter tout ce qui n'était pas ses livres saints et son peuple, lui conféraient une sorte d'étroite innocence.<sup>86</sup>

Taking into account Hadrien's affirmation, mentioned earlier in this chapter, that he learned to evaluate foreign elements on the basis of Greek values, it is not difficult to understand why he would be perplexed by the Jewish exception. The novel is touching upon the question of the incompatibility between Greeks and Jews, two peoples which organized their history around two different ideas, representation and its impossibility. 'Les Grecs et les Juifs, incompatibles éternels', writes Yourcenar.<sup>87</sup> But even as the novel recognizes that the Jewish and the Greek mentalities are irreconcilable, Jewishness is strictly approached from within the Greek perspective. In the process the novel contradicts itself and the limits of Greek thought when it comes to notions and cultures which lie beyond its scope and influence become evident.

Signs of this contradiction are present in the above quotation on Akiba's visit. Hadrien uses reason and dialogue to appeal to Akiba's humanity with a view to integrating the Jews into the Roman community. The possibility that Akiba's apathy might be due to the fact that reason, dialogue, humanity and community constitute conceptual abstractions of no value for a people refusing representation as such is not

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<sup>86</sup> *OR*, p. 435.

<sup>87</sup> *OR*, p. 360.

considered in the novel. Instead, Hadrien attributes the failure of the negotiations to Akiba's ignorance and, significantly, 'son refus d'accepter'. Now, *acceptation* is for Hadrien a necessary moment in the effort to understand the world. He thinks of his project of dialogue, pacification and re-construction of the empire as an outcome of his accepting attitude. Consequently, Akiba's refusal to accept makes him a fanatic, in the eyes of the emperor. Akiba is represented as a *révolté*, someone who is motivated by a stubborn belief in the superiority of his own representations. This conclusion clashes with the recognition in the novel that the Jews are a people without representations. Thus, in *Mémoires d'Hadrien* the Jews are depicted as both the disinherited and blind people who hate progress and resist conceptualization and aesthetic representation and, simultaneously, as the arrogant people with a profound sense of the superiority and purity of their own representations. The novel is at a loss to explain why the Jews are insensitive to the Greek light, and the result is violence brought upon them. There is physical brutality against the population, to which, it is stressed, Jews respond with more brutality. The Jews are banished from Jerusalem (p. 480), circumcision is outlawed (p. 467) and the study of the Law is prohibited (p. 479).

As in the case of Hadrien's doomed love affair with Antinoüs, the novel orientates the reader towards an aesthetico-political interpretation of Hadrien's failure to hellenize the Jews, but stops short of articulating and endorsing such an interpretation. By refusing to go beyond the Greek ideals of beauty and order, the novel misconceives the Jewish 'problem' and problematic. One of the key aporetic themes in the narrative of the war in Judea is that of the proposed re-building of Jerusalem as a new city with the name of *Ælia Capitolina* and the renaming of Judea as Palestine. As part of his programme of reconstruction, itself built on the existential-political imperative of acceptance and collaboration with time, Hadrien intends to extend his unified aesthetic vision to the land of the Jews.

Je prévois la capitale romaine habituelle : Ælia Capitolina aurait ses temples, ses marchés, ses bains publics, son sanctuaire de la Vénus romaine. [...] Ces projets indignèrent la populace juive : ces déshérités préféraient leur ruines à une grande ville où s'offriraient toutes les aubaines du gain, du savoir et du plaisir.<sup>88</sup>

Hadrien's almost provocative description of the city he imagines provides the answer to the question why the Jews would not accept the 'habitual' plan of a Roman capital. Their stubborn attachment to their ruins and their rejection of Greco-Roman politics of the City are related to the fact that they, as a people, are dedicated to a *law* of non-representability rather than to an *idea* of beauty. Hadrien is aware of that difference but not of the way it undercuts his argument. After Akiba interrupts his negotiation with Hadrien, the latter observes: 'Il paraît qu'il mourut plus tard en héros pour la cause de son peuple, ou plutôt de sa loi.'<sup>89</sup> Therefore, it is a law, not the desire for freedom and for the people's well-being, which motivates the Jewish rebellion. Despite his awareness, Hadrien collapses that difference by having recourse to the vague opposition between fanaticism and common sense: 'Je n'en tenais que davantage à faire de Jérusalem une ville comme les autres, où plusieurs races et plusieurs cultes pourraient exister en paix ; j'oubliais trop que dans tout combat entre le fanatisme et le sens commun, ce dernier a rarement le dessus'.<sup>90</sup>

Hadrien's homogenizing plan for the empire incorporates a particular understanding of difference and variety based on the all-embracing Greek paradigm. However, there is no room in this plan for the 'incompatible' case of the Jews, whose difference has to be eclipsed. This is why Jerusalem must be 'la capitale romaine habituelle', 'une ville comme les autres'. This is also why the Jewish god, exclusive as he is, must be worshipped in peace together with the other deities, as the last quotation above asserts. Hadrien's perception of the god of the Jews constitutes another aporetic theme in the novel. He realizes that this god's radical difference ('un dieu isolé du genre humain') lies in the fact that this god must not be represented in

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<sup>88</sup> OR, p. 430.

<sup>89</sup> OR, p. 435.

<sup>90</sup> OR, p. 468.

aesthetic artefacts but studied as a text. To this he responds by prohibiting the study of the Law in Judea, thus acknowledging indirectly the political importance of the difference between representation and its lack. Yet the uniqueness of the Jewish god is peremptorily denied in the novel, in the name of the Greek perception of the universality of the divine:

En principe, le judaïsme a sa place parmi les religions de l'empire ; en fait, Israël se refuse depuis des siècles à n'être qu'un peuple parmi les peuples, possédant un dieu parmi les dieux. [...] Aucun peuple, sauf Israël, n'a l'arrogance d'enfermer la vérité tout entière dans les limites étroites d'une seule conception divine, insultant ainsi à la multiplicité du Dieu qui contient tout ; aucun autre dieu n'a inspiré à ses adorateurs le mépris et la haine de ceux qui prient à des différents autels.<sup>91</sup>

As soon as it is guessed at, the singularity of the Jewish god is dismissed for transgressing the limit of acceptable difference. It may be claimed that the novel boldly underscores, but coyly shrinks from affirming, the incommensurable otherness represented by Judaism. Faced with it, Hadrien invokes the Greek conception of difference in harmony, order in disorder, which allows no possibility of absolute incompatibility. Unable to interpret Jewish monotheism in other terms than his own, Hadrien blames the Jews for having the arrogance to think of god as a unique totality. Thus he misconceives the basic quality of non-representability of the Jewish God. Hadrien insists on the multiplicity of a god who contains everything, whereas the Jews remain devoted to the singularity of a god who contains nothing.

In *La Fiction du politique*, Lacoue-Labarthe considers the significance of the Jewish god for the West in terms which are similar to those investigated in my thesis. His principal concern is with the Nazi extermination of the Jews, which he sees as the West's ultimate attempt to eliminate its elusive other, thus coming face-to-face with its own essence.

Dieu est effectivement mort à Auschwitz, en tout cas le Dieu de l'Occident gréco-chrétien, et ce n'est par aucune sorte de hasard que ceux que l'on voulait anéantir étaient les témoins, dans cet Occident-là, d'une autre origine du Dieu qui y avait été vénéré et pensé – si ce n'est même, peut-être, d'un autre Dieu, resté libre de sa

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<sup>91</sup> OR, pp. 467-68.

captation hellénistique et romaine et entravant par là-même le programme de l'accomplissement.<sup>92</sup>

The absolute alterity of the Jews is related to their thinking of a god who is irreducible to the Hellenistic and Roman traditions. The presence of this wholly different thought within the boundaries of a European conscience which tries to realize and re-invent itself prompts the persecutions of the Jews and leads, in modernity, to the plan of their extermination. It is in this sense that the Jews constitute, in Yourcenar's terms, 'un abcès', 'un doigt malade', in the metaphorical body of an empire – and, by extension, in the aesthetico-political construction that is the 'West' - looking to Greece in search of an identity. As I discussed earlier, Lacoue-Labarthe understands 'the programme of accomplishment' as the terrible culmination of the West's metaphysical project which involved the self-production of a political identity on the basis of the Greek prototype. Even though the differences remain palpable, this project can be broadly paralleled to Hadrien's attempt to hellenize the world, while the presence of the Jews symbolically compels both the West, in Lacoue-Labarthe's account, and the Roman Empire, in Yourcenar's one, to release their potential for violence. The sheer scale of violence is proportional to the absolute refusal by the Jews to participate in the Western aesthetic construction of the political. This refusal does not betray stubbornness, neither does it imply that the Jews adhere to a different representation. If anything, it signifies the modesty of a way of existing outside the intellectual confines of European humanism and without a dream of identity:

Les juifs n'appartiennent pas à l'*humanitas* ainsi définie parce qu'ils n'ont ni rêves ni mythes. Maurice Blanchot a raison d'écrire que « les juifs incarnent (...) le rejet des mythes, le renoncement aux idoles, la reconnaissance d'un ordre éthique qui se manifeste par le respect de la loi. Dans le juif, dans le "mythe du juif", ce que veut anéantir Hitler c'est précisément l'homme libéré des mythes ». [...] C'est un « peuple » informe, inesthétique, qui par définition ne peut entrer dans le procès de l'auto-fictionnement et ne peut pas faire un sujet. C'est-à-dire un être propre. [...] En somme les juifs sont des êtres indéfiniment mimétiques, c'est-à-dire le lieu d'une *mimèsis*

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<sup>92</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, p. 38.

*sans fin*, à la fois interminable et inorganique, ne produisant aucun art et n'aboutissant à aucune appropriation. La déstabilisation même.<sup>93</sup>

Lacoue-Labarthe attempts to explain here why the Jewish prohibition on representation situates the Jews beyond the scope of the Greco-Roman determination of subjectivity. In so far as this determination of subjectivity presupposes the self-identity of the individual in the present, it also introduces the idea of the properness of the subject. Properness, the coincidence of sign and referent which makes each subject unique and autonomous, is at the root of European humanism. Extreme forms of political modernity, such as Nazism, radicalize the humanist myth of properness with regard to such ideas as nation and race. However the Jews, Lacoue-Labarthe claims, can be no part of this myth. Their 'im-properness' is fundamentally a question of their reluctance to recognize the category of the proper name. The prohibition on representing god marks the Jews' distance from the aesthetico-political logic of the West and its idea of *humanitas*. It means that the Jews do not serve the longing for identity; rather, they abide to a Law. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, this distinction highlights the particularity of the Jews as people of 'endless mimesis', that is, people of perpetual difference, for whom a stable subjectivity is not only impossible but, strictly speaking, not even desirable.

This interpretation offers a way to understand how *Mémoires d'Hadrien* is embedded in its immediate post-war context as well as how it encapsulates, exposes and reproduces modernity's ambivalent discourse on (political) identity. With regard to Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe goes further than the charge of ambivalence, and states that Heidegger's appreciation of the political was incorrect and his silence after the extermination unpardonable. For Lacoue-Labarthe, Heidegger's failure is all the more puzzling, as he was better placed than any thinker to perceive the West's violent effort to efface difference through the technological suppression of mimesis,

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<sup>93</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, pp. 81-82, emphasis by the author. The quotation from Blanchot is from Maurice Blanchot, 'Les Intellectuels en question', *Le Débat*, No 33 (29 May 1984).



itself reflected on the technological annihilation of the Jews. *Mutatis mutandis*, and accepting in advance that there is no question of ethical lapse on the part of Yourcenar, one may make an analogous claim about her. It is inconsistent with Yourcenar's profound and refined scepticism vis-à-vis any kind of conceptual abstraction that she did not discuss anywhere the implications of the political aesthetic. Especially *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, a political novel in many ways, which begins with a uniquely powerful statement on the impossibility of representation, could offer a privileged platform for exposing Europe's nostalgia for the self-sufficient political subject. In the wake of the Second World War, Yourcenar could see how Europe's loyalty to the struggle for a stable universal subject led to racism and brutality. Indeed *Mémoires* can be read partly as a statement of Yourcenar's awareness of the fundamentally aesthetic character of politics in the West and of its essentially Greek origins. The novel also shows how this politics is responsible for sublimating and petrifying the individual (the case of Antinoüs) and suppressing all difference (the case of the Jews). And yet, these failures are not allowed to affect the predominant political thesis expressed in it. This thesis still supports the possibility of a new aesthetico-political beginning for Europe after the war, a new universal representation which would allow the self-authentication of the individual, just as Hadrien prepares to die as the archetype of *humanitas* at the end of the novel. The empire, with Hadrien as its spirit, thus risks becoming a signifier of universalized difference, of a totality which contains pluralism but only at the cost of silencing the incompatible 'subjects' of absolute alterity, Antinoüs and the Jews. Yourcenar's courageous effort to subvert the semantics of authenticity by introducing improperness to the notion of properness and impurity to the notion of purity, functions here as a simple device for rescuing the essentialist politics of identity which emerged traumatized after the war. Thus, while in her meditations on existence and in her literary and art criticism she re-discovers the lost subject in its infirmity and inadequacy, her political thought is ultimately tied to a conventionally

Greek (Lacoue-Labarthe would say: Platonic) perception of authenticity. In all this, ‘the Jews’ remain repressed, and the memory of their un-aestheticism is largely ignored.

It is worth pointing out that a number of scholars have questioned the central but ambivalent place of Jewish figures in Yourcenar’s fiction, without necessarily portraying her as an anti-Semite. One of these scholars, Michèle Sarde, traces references to Jews in Yourcenar’s work, interviews and letters, and attempts to contextualise these references in relation to other writers whom Yourcenar read. Sarde concludes that ‘le Juif reste pour Yourcenar l’étranger par nature qu’il était exemplairement pour elle et les romanciers de sa génération’.<sup>94</sup> Further, Sarde claims that Yourcenar attempts to conflate the otherness that Jews represent for her by evoking a general idea of universality and humanism which is supposed to transcend that otherness:

[Cet] humanisme niveleur [...], dans sa visée à se mettre « à la place de l’être évoqué », « détour par lequel on atteint le mieux l’humain et l’universel », finirait par déboucher sur une tolérance de l’intolérance et sur un amalgame de tous les malheurs et persécutions universels, dont la généralité finirait par les frapper de nullité.<sup>95</sup>

It is this idea of humanism, whose Greek origins I have emphasized in my thesis, that Yourcenar evokes in *Mémoires*, to ensure the reader’s ‘tolerance of Hadrien’s intolerance’ (to paraphrase Sarde). This universal humanism is accurately juxtaposed by Sarde to the otherness of the Jews who, at least in *Mémoires d’Hadrien*, remain ‘étrangers par nature’.

Like Sarde, Alexandre Terneuil has had access to unpublished manuscripts and letters by Yourcenar, now in ‘Marguerite Yourcenar Papers’, Houghton Library, Harvard, and has written on ‘la question juive’ in her work. Terneuil shows how Yourcenar’s writings ‘témoignent de son attention certaine et constante face à

<sup>94</sup> Michèle Sarde, ‘Représentations des Juifs chez Marguerite Yourcenar’, in Camillo Faverzani (ed.), *Marguerite Yourcenar et la Méditerranée* (Clermont-Ferrand: Association des Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Clermont-Ferrand, 1995), pp. 71-82, (p. 78).

<sup>95</sup> Sarde, p. 79. The quotations within the quotation are from *Les Yeux ouverts*, p. 62.

l'antisémitisme', and stresses that Yourcenar re-wrote and edited her work so as to avoid charges of racism.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, Terneuil mentions that in the first edition of Jean Blot's monograph *Marguerite Yourcenar* in 1971, there was a reference to Hadrien's anti-Semitism which was omitted in the 1980 edition of that book. This reference reads as follows.

Tournons les pages relatives aux guerres de Judée et faisons vite pour n'avoir pas à nous demander d'où vient à l'empereur cet antisémitisme si moderne dans le bon ton digne du XVI<sup>e</sup> arrondissement de Paris ou de la banlieue correspondante de Bruxelles et qui se résume en ceci qu'on n'a rien contre ces gens impossibles si ce n'est l'entêtement malseyant qu'ils mettent à vivre ou à refuser de disparaître.<sup>97</sup>

Reading Yourcenar's unpublished letters, Terneuil gives evidence that this charge of anti-Semitism was taken personally by Yourcenar, a fact which confirms my argument that she identified with Hadrien's politics to a large extent.<sup>98</sup> It was after the 1971 publication of Jean Blot's book that Yourcenar began adopting a defensive attitude in her interviews with regard to her supposed anti-Semitism.<sup>99</sup>

To return to *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, one must certainly acknowledge that this novel does not have to be read as an oblique reference to the then recent war, neither does Hadrien's Rome stand exclusively for modern Europe, let alone Nazi Germany. Nonetheless, the historical relevance of this novel cannot be underestimated. *Mémoires* treats historically and narratively such topical political themes as the

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<sup>96</sup> Alexandre Terneuil, 'Réflexions sur la question juive chez Marguerite Yourcenar', in Francesca Counihan and Bérangère Deprez (eds), *Écriture du pouvoir, pouvoir de l'écriture : La réalité sociale et politique dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar* (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 107-117, (p. 113).

<sup>97</sup> Terneuil, p. 112, quoting Blot, in Jean Blot, *Marguerite Yourcenar*, coll. « Écrivains d'hier et d'aujourd'hui », Seghers, No 38, 1971, p. 149.

<sup>98</sup> Terneuil, p. 113. On this topic, see also Josyane Savigneau, *Marguerite Yourcenar: L'Invention d'une vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), pp. 339-340.

<sup>99</sup> See, for instance, *Les Yeux ouverts*, p. 280, where Yourcenar embraces again, in 1980, the idea of 'l'intransigeance juive'.

Scholars who have written on the presence of the Jews in *Mémoires* include Thomas Gergely, 'La Mémoire suspecte d'Hadrien', in *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles* 3-4 (1988), pp. 45-50; and Janet Whatley, 'Mémoires d'Hadrien: A Manual for Princes', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Volume 50, No 2, (Winter 1980/81), pp. 221-237, who writes: '[Hadrian] is the possessor of a marvelous formula for the balanced life [...]. That there can be other formulas of competitive completeness barely comes into Hadrian's consciousness. What is there that does not welcome the Graeco-Roman? Well, there is Judaea.' (p. 233.)

creation of a vision for Europe, the consolidation of peace and the perceived need for charismatic leadership, over the background of the failure of philosophy, historiography and the arts to provide a functional field of reference for political action. It should not be forgotten that Yourcenar invited the allegorical reading of her novel in her interviews. For example, in her 1976 interview with Claude Servan-Schreiber, she observes:

Quand j'ai écrit *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, entre 1948 et 1951, la raison qui m'a ramenée à ce sujet, auquel je pensais depuis longtemps, était la préoccupation du Prince. Dans un monde qui se défaisait, était-il encore possible (avait-il jamais été possible ?) qu'un homme soit assez fort ou assez subtil pour retenir entre ses mains ce qui risquait de crouler?<sup>100</sup>

But Yourcenar is already clear about the contemporary political significance of *Mémoires* in the 'Carnets de notes de *Mémoires d'Hadrien*' (written in 1952), at the point where she describes the chronicle of the genesis of the novel. She writes that, in 1948, she received in the USA, where she lived, a trunk from Europe, containing her old copies of Dio Cassius' *Roman History*, and the *Historia Augusta*, among other books and notes. Here are her comments:

Cette nuit-là, je rouvris deux volumes parmi ceux qui venaient aussi de m'être rendus, débris d'une bibliothèque dispersée. C'étaient Dion Cassius dans la belle impression d'Henri Estienne, et un tome d'une édition quelconque de *L'Histoire Auguste*, les deux principales sources de la vie d'Hadrien, achetés à l'époque où je me proposais d'écrire ce livre. *Tout ce que le monde et moi avons traversé à l'intervalle enrichissait ces chroniques d'un temps révolu*, projetait sur cette existence impériale d'autres lumières, d'autres ombres. Naguère, j'avais surtout pensé au lettré, au voyageur, au poète, à l'amant ; rien de tout cela ne s'effaçait, mais je voyais pour la première fois se dessiner avec une netteté extrême, parmi toutes ces figures, la plus officielle à la fois et la plus secrète, celle de l'empereur. *Avoir vécu dans un monde qui se défait m'enseignait l'importance du prince.*<sup>101</sup>

<sup>100</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar: *Portrait d'une voix*, ed. by Maurice Delcroix (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), p. 178.

<sup>101</sup> OR, p. 525, my emphasis.

On the same topic, see also Yourcenar's interview with Rosbo, in Patrick de Rosbo, *Entretiens radiophoniques avec Marguerite Yourcenar* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1972), especially pp. 64-66. Yourcenar's readers have not failed to notice the historical relevance of *Mémoires*. For example, George Fréris writes of Yourcenar's double reference to the past and to the present: 'Sous le souci d'Hadrien, préoccupé de laisser ses traces dans l'histoire, il faut discerner la 'ruse' d'écriture de M. Yourcenar, soucieuse de nous livrer ses pensées sur le monde actuel. Si Hadrien pense à l'avenir de la *Pax Romana*, M. Yourcenar, partant de l'état actuel du monde, songe à son avenir.' Georges Fréris 'L'Esprit décadent du XIXe siècle et l'angoisse du XXe siècle dans *Mémoires d'Hadrien*', in Georges

It becomes clear especially in the italicized phrases that Yourcenar wished her readers to relate closely *Mémoires d'Hadrien* to the historical context in which it was written. This relation is indeed vital to the understanding of the novel, even as individual interpretations, including the present thesis, deviate from those suggested by Yourcenar. Rome, as portrayed in the novel, constitutes an allegory of Europe in so far as it bears some of the characteristics of Western political modernity, prominent among which is the search for a stable political identity at an age deprived of religious and humanist references. Hadrien's failure to secure such an identity, much as it is ascribed to the bad faith of the masses and the 'natural' tendency of things for disorder, allegorizes the persistence of difference in representation and the structural inadequacy of the political subject. Elevated to the state of master and god and being responsible for mental and physical violence on his subjects, Hadrien incarnates inevitably the absolute leader of the politics of essentialism and aestheticism.

In this context, and probably going against Yourcenar's intentions more than at any other point, I suggest that the Jews, who are the principal victims of this politics, be seen as an allegory of those forms of subjectivity that resist Europe's radically appropriative attitude. It would of course be inaccurate to contend that the Jews of *Mémoires d'Hadrien* represent the Jews as victims of Nazism and, even less, the actual Jewish people. On the other hand, it is not a coincidence that their presence destabilizes the novel more subtly and more substantially than any character, episode, movement or situation. At an allegorical level, the Jews stand for the West's knowledge, whether conscious or not, of the metaphysical and therefore unreal foundations of the 'empire' – a term now resonating with diverse significations, including Rome, Europe, the European 'spirit', the European's 'psyche', the Western political subject and the subject *tout court*. The allegorization of the name 'the Jews'

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Fréris and Rémy Poignault, (eds), *Marguerite Yourcenar, Écrivain du XIXe siècle ?* (Clermont-Ferrand: SIEY, 2004), pp. 183-191 (pp. 189-90).

is the principal narrative device of Jean-François Lyotard's study *Heidegger et « les juifs »*.<sup>102</sup> I shall now turn to this book to examine how the presence of 'the Jews' points to the limits of ontological thinking and also enframes Yourcenar's apprehension of difference.

### Beyond the political aesthetic: Lyotard and the 'jews'

*Heidegger et « les juifs »* is a less rigorous but more ambitious work than *La Fiction du politique*, to which it is indebted. Lyotard studies carefully Lacoue-Labarthe's deconstructive demonstration of European totalitarianism as a consequence of modern political aestheticism. He agrees that Heidegger's thought was as finely attuned as any thinker's to detect the shortcomings of the politics with which he collaborated. Finally, he echoes Lacoue-Labarthe's question as to why Heidegger was so inexcusably reticent in acknowledging the victims of Nazism. Lyotard's answer is broadly that Heidegger's silence cannot be reduced to a fault within his thought, but to deconstruction's inability fully to examine its dependence on the context in which it operates.<sup>103</sup> For Lyotard, there is something in the thought of 'the Jews' that will escape even the most rigorous deconstructive operation. To designate it, he begins his essay by divesting the word Jews from its properness as a noun:

J'écris ainsi « les juifs », ce n'est pas prudence ni faute de mieux. Minuscule pour dire que ce n'est pas à une nation que je pense. Pluriel pour signifier que ce n'est pas une figure ou un sujet politique (le sionisme), religieux (le judaïsme), ni philosophique (la pensée hébraïque) que j'allègue sous ce nom. Guillemets pour éviter la confusion de ces « juifs » avec les juifs réels.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger et les « juifs »* (Paris: Galilée, 1988).

<sup>103</sup> 'Le silence sur l'extermination n'est pas un lapsus déconstructionniste. Ou s'il l'est, c'est la déconstruction elle-même qui est au moins le lapsus.' Lyotard, *Heidegger*, p. 122.

<sup>104</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger*, p.13.

By allegorizing ‘the jews’, Lyotard releases a signifier which cannot coincide with a specific referent, thus introducing the idea of the heterogeneity of a non-appropriable subject.<sup>105</sup> ‘The jews’ signify the people and peoples who have resisted the West’s spirit of creativity and the impulse to establish identity-forming institutions, because they lead a life of intellectual and geographical homelessness. Lyotard includes in this account Jewish and non-Jewish modernists alike, such as Celan, Kafka, Joyce, Proust, Beckett, Freud, Adorno and even Céline, among others. What these artists, thinkers and writers have in common is that they lent their voice to those excluded from modern political and philosophical discourse, those whom Lyotard and Lacoue-Labarthe call *le déchet*, the industrial waste of modern geo-politics and geo-philosophy.<sup>106</sup> The following passage from Lyotard’s book carries echoes from the phraseology of *La Fiction du politique*. Through the references to the Western ‘empire’ which tries to found itself to the detriment of ‘the jews’, it also supports my reading of *Mémoires d’Hadrien*.

Il me semble que [...] « les juifs » sont dans l’« esprit » de l’Occident, occupé à se fonder, ce qui résiste à cet esprit ; dans sa volonté, la volonté de vouloir, ce qui entrave la volonté ; dans son accomplissement, projet et progrès, ce qui ne cesse de rouvrir la plaie de l’inaccompli. Qu’ils sont l’irrémissible dans son mouvement de rémission et de remise. Qu’ils sont le non-domesticable dans l’obsession de dominer, dans la compulsion à l’emprise domaniale, dans la passion de l’empire récurrente depuis la Grèce hellénistique et la Rome chrétienne, « les juifs » jamais chez eux là où ils se trouvent, inintégrables, inconvertibles, inexpulsables.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>105</sup> In his book *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), Daniel Boyarin questions Lyotard’s freedom to allegorize ‘real, upper-case Jews’. He writes:

The critical text which has gone furthest in employing ‘the jew’ as an allegorical trope for otherness is Lyotard’s recent *Heidegger and ‘the jews’*. [...] But why does Lyotard feel free to appropriate the name ‘the jews’? [...] I want to insist in response to Lyotard that there is a loss and a danger either in allegorizing away real, upper-case Jews or in regarding them primarily as a problem for Europe. (p. 220.)

While I cannot go here into the details of Boyarin’s argument, I would point out that I see nothing wrong with the freedom of any writer to use allegory (of any name, proper or otherwise) as he or she wishes. Besides, as I discussed in Chapter 2, allegory is a way of dislocating the sign rather than repressing its polysemy. It is only to a preconception of properness and a desire for constancy of meaning that allegory can do any harm.

<sup>106</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger*, p. 151, Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, p. 38.

<sup>107</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger*, p. 45.

Obliquely present in this passage is a critique of Heidegger's voluntarism, ('la volonté de vouloir'), expressed politically through Heidegger's collaboration with the Nazi regime, and philosophically through Dasein's *resolution* to found itself authentically. Moreover, the phrase 'l'« esprit » de l'Occident' hints to *De l'esprit*, Derrida's deconstruction of the term 'spirit' and its demarcations in Heidegger's writings.<sup>108</sup> Further in his book, Lyotard applauds Derrida's conclusion that Heidegger's thought needed a metaphysical supplement, the projection of Europe's 'spirit', so as to be politically functional and have an impact on his audience. However, Derrida's deconstruction, as that of Lacoue-Labarthe, are still deemed too nihilistic or too much attracted by the 'demon of philosophizing' to capture the incommensurability of the thought of 'the jews'.<sup>109</sup> What is, then, that Heidegger could not think about 'the jews' and in what principal ways did he fail to transcend the Western philosophical tradition, according to Lyotard? It is worth giving a brief account of the principal argument of *Heidegger and the "jews"*, as it opens a way to understand how Yourcenar failed to respond to the alterity of the Jews in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, a novel written to celebrate difference and irreducibility.

Lyotard resumes here his controversial reading of the Kantian sublime, in order to establish a radical difference between the sense of beauty and the indeterminate feeling of the sublime. Rather than delve into Lyotard's commentary on Kant, I will concentrate here on the way the difference between the beautiful and the sublime complicates the history of the West.<sup>110</sup>

The sublime is a feeling of pleasure and pain, 'une motion à la fois attractive et répulsive, comme une sorte de spasme'. This feeling exceeds by far the potential of the mind's faculties, including the imagination, to apprehend, structure and represent

<sup>108</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger et la question* (Paris: Galilée, 1987).

<sup>109</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger*, pp. 121 and 136.

<sup>110</sup> On this subject, see especially Lyotard's *Leçons sur l'analytique du sublime* (Paris: Galilée, 1991). Other essays on the Kantian sublime by Lyotard include 'Réponse à la question : Qu'est-ce que le postmoderne ?', *Critique*, No 419 (avril 1982), and 'Le sublime et l'avant-garde', in Lyotard, *L'Inhumain: Causeries sur le temps* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), 101-118.



sensory experience. It does not lend itself to structural or dialectical analysis and cannot be tamed by any aesthetics of beauty. ‘Ce sentiment témoigne que du « trop » a « touché » l’esprit, trop pour ce qu’il peut en faire. C’est pourquoi le sublime n’a nulle considération pour la forme, est « informe »’. Contrary to the beautiful, this ‘feeling of the mind’ does not give rise to a linear temporalization of experience: ‘sentiment incompatible au temps, comme l’est la mort’.<sup>111</sup> The temporality of the sublime can best be approached, according to Lyotard, with reference to the Freudian idea of *Nachträglichkeit*, deferred action. The sublime feeling is akin to the belated response of the psychic apparatus to a shock for which it was unprepared and which has left it in a state of permanent infancy. In psychoanalysis, this shock stems from the paradoxical timing of sexuality, which registers in the psyche both too soon and too late, thus stalling its development. Being at a loss to ‘figure out’, that is, to structure and represent, that which has affected it, the psyche fails to temporalize the sexual event.

It is this failure to temporalize that Lyotard compares with the West’s failure to historicize itself. He considers Western thought as a psychic apparatus under a permanent shock which it can neither fully narrativize nor totally repress and forget. Since the event which occasioned this shock is non-representable, Lyotard does not have a specific name for it, although it certainly revolves around the metaphor of sexuality. In any case, the historical effect of this event is unmistakable. Lyotard thinks of the Western tradition as an effort to repress the memory of the ‘unthinkable’ event, through the various *mises en scène* proposed by speculative thought. This tradition begins with Greek aesthetics, philosophy and rhetoric, and it is constantly challenged by ‘the problematic of the unrepresentable’ which ‘emerges with the question of the sublime’:

On essaie évidemment, les Romantiques notamment, la pensée spéculative, de refermer [la problématique de l’imprésentable], de refouler secondairement la chose,

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<sup>111</sup> All the last quotations from Lyotard, *Heidegger*, p. 61.

en en faisant une esthétique (dialectique, ironique, humoristique, dandy). Alors qu'avec cette étrange notion, qui par Longin et Boileau, nous vient non des Grecs mais des juifs et des chrétiens, c'est la thèse, la position même, de l'*aisthèsis* qui est mise en jeu, la possibilité et la pertinence du beau et par conséquent la poétique classique, tragédie incluse, au sens d'Aristote.<sup>112</sup>

As far as Christianity is concerned, Lyotard specifies that although it partakes in the perpetual promise of a closure that would allow the naming of the event, it has already confirmed the presentation of the Other, the Messiah, on earth, and it keeps confirming it every day in church.<sup>113</sup> It is only 'the jews' who are hostages to a promise that is never fulfilled, and which must remain a promise: 'On se rappelle tout le temps que ça arrivera, et ce qui arrive est seulement qu'on doit se le rappeler [...] Doit suffire à sauver l'interminable et la promesse.'<sup>114</sup> The task of contemporary art and writing is defined along these lines as the effort to save this promise, to repeat the impossibility of an end and a closure.

Ce que l'art peut faire, c'est se porter témoin non du sublime, mais de cette aporie de l'art et de sa douleur. Il ne dit pas l'indicible, il dit qu'il ne peut pas le dire. [...] Tout ce que je sais faire, c'est de raconter que je ne sais plus raconter cette histoire. Et cela devrait suffire.<sup>115</sup>

Following Adorno, Lyotard writes that, especially after Auschwitz, art can no longer be concerned with beauty and taste. Art cannot be mimesis, because absolute otherness has no form and does not lend itself to *aesthesis*, to sense perception. Writing and art must be anaesthetic so as to resist the effacement of the difference between representability and the sublime – an effacement attempted by the Nazis, but continued in the contemporary managerial or late capitalist world. 'C'est de cette résistance extrême que l'écriture et l'art contemporains peuvent nourrir leur résistance au « tout est possible », et d'elle seulement. L'anesthésie pour lutter contre l'amnésie.'<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger*, p. 65.

<sup>113</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger*, p. 68-69.

<sup>114</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger*, p. 68.

<sup>115</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger*, p. 81.

<sup>116</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger*, p. 84.

According to Lyotard, the extermination camps were the site of the West's - and not only Nazi Germany's - most concerted effort to obliterate the memory of the 'unsayable'. The Jews were not seen by the Nazis as an enemy in any immediately political or military way. But they constituted a threat in that they were the bearers of a Law which provides that the promise of total representation, the West's Greek dream, shall remain unfulfilled. Consequently, exterminating the Jews was a prerequisite for the accomplishment of the West's aesthetic project.

It is at this point that Lyotard begins to diverge from Lacoue-Labarthe's account. Lyotard cites Lacoue-Labarthe's claim, which I quoted earlier, that the Jews were the principal victims of the extermination because they remained the witnesses in the West of another origin of God, of another God.<sup>117</sup> In this perception of 'another God', Lyotard discerns the persistence of onto-theology, of the thought of Being, which deconstruction cannot articulate. 'Si ce Dieu est autre, ce n'est pas comme un autre Dieu, mais comme autre que ce que l'Occident gréco-chrétien nomme Dieu. Autrement que Dieu, parce qu'« autrement qu'être » (Levinas)'.<sup>118</sup> In a similar vein, Lyotard discusses the claim that God died in Auschwitz, which is repeated in *La Fiction du politique*. He writes: 'Dieu ne peut pas « être mort » puisqu'il n'est pas une vie (esthétique). Il est un nom de rien, le sans-nom, une loi seulement inapprochable qui ne se signifie pas dans la nature en chiffres, mais se raconte dans un livre.'<sup>119</sup> This notion of the singularity of the Jewish god, foreign to Christian monotheism and, generally, to the Western perception of the divine, is one that is not adequately accounted for in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, as I showed above. I will return to this point shortly.

*Heidegger et les « juifs »* defines a *différend* between on the one hand beauty and representability, descending from the tragic and archaic Greek tradition, and on the

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<sup>117</sup> See n. 92, this chapter.

<sup>118</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger*, p. 131.

<sup>119</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger*, p. 129.

other, the art and writing of the sublime and the thought of the ‘anaesthetic’, as they have been monotonously re-iterated by the allegorized ‘jews’. The result of this incompatibility is the silencing and the misery which ‘the jews’ suffer. In terms of this *différend*, Lyotard attempts to demarcate the limits of deconstruction, as practiced by Heidegger as well as by his post-structuralist followers, which certainly does not authorize this silencing, but has nevertheless nothing to say about it.

[Demeurant] établie dans la pensée de l'être, dans le préjugé « occidental » que l'Autre est l'être, [la déconstruction] n'a rien à dire d'une pensée de qui l'Autre est la Loi. Elle n'en prédit rien, assurément : elle n'en dit rien. Son silence trahit la méprise par laquelle tout « savoir » s'en prend à l'Autre sous le nom de la vérité de l'être.<sup>120</sup>

This passage also explains why, unlike Lacoue-Labarthe, Lyotard does not find Heidegger's silence after the Holocaust enigmatic. From his point of view, the thought of ‘the jews’ is as incommensurable with Heidegger's ontology as it is with recent deconstruction. For Lyotard, neither Heidegger nor Lacoue-Labarthe or other deconstructionists can approach the thought of radical otherness, in so far as otherness is still determined by them in terms of Being, or its negation or modification. Since Being is always related to aesthetic representation (and more specifically to *technè*, the authentic representation of *physis* by man), ontology cannot come to terms with the otherness of the anaesthetic of which the ‘jews’ are a fitting allegory.

In the same vein, Lyotard challenges Lacoue-Labarthe's judgement that ‘l'Extermination est, à l'égard de l'Occident la terrible révélation de son essence’.<sup>121</sup> For Lyotard, nothing is revealed by the extermination, in so far as the thought of the Other, the thought of ‘the jews’ was both known *and* repressed before, during and after the War. That which the extermination made plain, according to Lyotard, was not ‘the essence of the West’, but that there is no essence, no Being. Consequently, the art and writing of the sublime aim not at revealing or revolutionizing Europe's

<sup>120</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger*, p. 145.

<sup>121</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger*, pp. 136 and 144. See n. 30 in this chapter.

essence, but at using representation in order to signify the impossibility of representing.

To be sure the above brief foray into what is arguably a set of meditations by Lyotard, rather than a philosophical thesis, touches only tangentially on the issue of the margins of philosophy and the beginning of the thought of the Other. Still, I suggest that it shows a direction for evaluating further Yourcenar's attempt to reconcile difference and authenticity in representation.

In the light of Lyotard's book, *Mémoires d'Hadrien* appears to be very close and yet very far from the thought of the Other. Very close, because the persistence of difference is the main theoretical theme of the novel, and the consistency with which this theme is treated is its main characteristic. The endless deferral of the referent in art, philosophy and poetry haunts Hadrien at the opening chapter of the novel and qualifies from the start its two central questions, that of existence and that of politics. The love affair with Antinoüs introduces the problematic of the heteronomy of the subject while his death underlines the distance between the self and other human beings. The theme of the Jews, underexplored and stifled as it may be, is still strongly present in the novel, as if Yourcenar were toying with an idea which could challenge radically her proposal for a new beginning for Europe. Questions of difference are also shaping narrative choices concerning the genre of the historical novel, from history to fiction and vice versa, and more generally the way to re-capture the 'past' in the 'present' – a topic which remains sufficiently relevant to the present thesis.

At the same time, *Mémoires d'Hadrien* stands very far from the thought of the Other, due to Yourcenar's persistent suggestion that authenticity - existential, artistic, literary and political – is still possible after the War and perhaps then more than ever before. This belief led her to re-negotiate the notions of authenticity, purity and originality in such a way as to reconcile them with the fact of difference. Inauthenticity becomes for her a new form of authenticity, repetition a new form of originality; disorder is integrated in order, and finally difference ends in identity. As I

have tried to show, this reworking of conventional metaphysical themes leads to a fascinating, if peculiar, existentialism. However, it fails to support a theoretically solid understanding of the political. When transposed to the level of politics, authenticity and identity prove to be entirely dependent on a traditional perception of aesthetics. Politics, however expanded as a notion to include impurity, temporality and polyphony, proves immediately to be a form of shaping and projecting: shaping the people into a cohesive community and projecting a sense of identity onto this community.

Thus Yourcenar proposes a spatio-temporal project which remains within the logic of aestheticism, while insisting that this project is based on difference and the overcoming of aestheticism. Lacoue-Labarthe's and Lyotard's commentaries show that Heidegger's spatio-temporal project is similarly aesthetico-political in its constitution, as Heidegger's writings of his more openly political period manifestly show. Especially Lyotard's *Heidegger et « les juifs »* points to a way of thinking difference that cuts across the Greek determinations of the natural and the beautiful, and attempts to go beyond the thought of Being. In *Mémoires*, the episode of Antinoüs and, principally, the narrative of Hadrien's Jewish wars touch the limit of the ontological, before the novel recoils back to the safer discourse of authenticity. To paraphrase Lyotard, in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, the nostalgia for the authentic suppresses 'the promise of nothing'.<sup>122</sup>

### The persistence of the Other

Marguerite Yourcenar remained constant in her belief that authentic subjectivity is possible within a universal aesthetic premise which is never seriously put under

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<sup>122</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger*, p.129.

question in her work. To this universalism, I have opposed Lyotard's and Lacoue-Labarthe's searches for the subject of a radical difference which has never been seduced by the aesthetico-political humanism invented in Europe. This subject is also undoubtedly sought by Heidegger (in *Being and Time*, in 'Letter on Humanism' and elsewhere), as both the above thinkers concede, despite what they see as his failures, which they recognize as the failures of philosophy as such. It is now the moment to add that this 'other' subject is also sought by Yourcenar, despite her obsession with the idea of universality, Greco-Roman or oriental.

The thought of the Other, of the improper and the unoriginally different, survives almost in spite of itself and almost inconspicuously, in various parts of her criticism. Some of the best examples, I suggest, come from 'Humanisme et hermétisme chez Thomas Mann', an essay which is never very far from the thought of the 'unsayable' and the 'inexplicable'. It contains a phrase which would sound strange coming from any conventional humanist: 'La vérité dernière est une vérité d'épouvantement.'<sup>123</sup> Starting from her own humanist viewpoint, Yourcenar has to accept Mann's 'dark' humanism whose referent is not 'man' or 'nature', but something more enigmatic which cannot be represented. Yourcenar refers to the famous quote from Hamlet, 'What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties [...]',<sup>124</sup> and then she remarks:

Mais déjà la phrase de Shakespeare sur les infinies facultés humaines ouvre la porte à une autre forme d'humanisme aux aguets de tout ce qui, en nous, dépasse les ressources et les aptitudes ordinaires ; elle débouche quoi qu'on fasse sur l'immense arrière-plan peuplé de forces plus étranges que ne le veut une philosophie pour qui la nature aussi est une entité simple. Cet humanisme tourné vers l'inexpliqué, le ténébreux, voire l'occulte, semble de prime abord s'opposer à l'humanisme traditionnel : il en est bien plutôt l'extrême pointe et l'aile gauche.<sup>125</sup>

Although Yourcenar is characteristically keen to rescue the idea of humanism, and even to reduce Mann's 'hermeticism' to a form of traditional humanism, she

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<sup>123</sup> *EM*, p. 173.

<sup>124</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene II.

<sup>125</sup> *EM*, p. 193.

certainly looks here to a direction beyond the aesthetic. She stands ‘sur le bord de l’informulé et de l’ineffable [où] les mots et les concepts se taisent’, as she writes in another essay.<sup>126</sup> All that a writer can do at this point is state that she can go no further by means of representation.

However, the voice of the ‘Other’, of the ‘inhuman’ subject which remains forgotten, without ambition and without authenticity, can also be heard occasionally in Yourcenar’s fiction. It is not so much specific fictional characters that convey this state of dissolution, as individual moments in the text. An example comes from the concluding paragraphs of the novella *Anna, soror...*. Anna, the incestuous sister, lives in a kind of tortured apathy, where even ‘la consolation des larmes lui était refusée’.<sup>127</sup> She is beyond pain and even beyond mourning for the dead brother-lover: ‘Comme d’autres se fouettent pour renflammer leurs sens, Anna se flagellait de ses pensées pour raviver son deuil, mais sa douleur épuisée n’était plus qu’une lassitude. Ce cœur mortifié se refusait à saigner.’<sup>128</sup> Anna lives in excess of her own humanity and her mourning is without content. In the convent where she withdraws towards the end of her life, she resumes the reading of the Catholic mystics, but not for the meaning their texts contain.

Le livre restait ouvert sur le regard de la croisée ; Anna, assise sous le pâle soleil de l’automne, posait de temps en temps sur une ligne ses yeux fatigués. Elle ne cherchait pas à suivre le sens, mais ces grandes phrases ardentes faisaient partie de la musique amoureuse et funèbre qui avait accompagné sa vie.<sup>129</sup>

Structurally, the function of this passage is to prefigure Anna’s imminent death as a resolution to the drama of her life. Nonetheless, it also points to an interpretation which does not involve reconciliation and closure. As Anna reads, looking not for the meaning of the text, but for the musicality of the phrases, we are invited to think of her as an old woman who is free from the narrative of her life. Free, not because she

<sup>126</sup> In ‘Ton et langage dans le roman historique’, *EM*, p. 305.

<sup>127</sup> *OR*, p. 927. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Anna Soror...* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), for the first edition.

<sup>128</sup> *OR*, p. 928.

<sup>129</sup> *OR*, p. 929.



has found redemption, but because she can now be silent, outside all discourse. To be sure, Yourcenar quickly discounts this interpretation and implies that Anna was ‘reunited’ with her brother cum lover cum Messiah at her deathbed. Still, Anna in her final years and days remains a powerful image of a woman who knows that no mythicization or representation can alleviate her pain.

The final quotation where the thought of the Other appears comes from *Denier du rêve*, Yourcenar’s most openly political novel, although not also her most resourceful, in my opinion. It contains a passage which comes very close to an understanding of those whom Lyotard allegorically called ‘the jews’. Indeed, it is a young Jewish character, Massimo Iakovleff, who talks to Marcella Sarte, an Italian communist, determined to shoot Mussolini that same evening.

Sais-tu, reprit-il à voix basse, il m’arrive de penser que c’est nous, nous qui ne sommes pas purs, nous qui avons été humiliés, dépouillés, salis, nous qui sans jamais rien avoir avons tout perdu, nous qui n’avons ni pays, ni parti (non! non! ne proteste pas), qui pourrions être ceux par lesquels le règne arrive... Nous, qu’on ne corrompra plus, qu’on ne peut pas tromper... Commencer tout de suite... à nous seuls...<sup>130</sup>

The voice of the ‘Other’ is here unmistakable. Yourcenar draws from a traditional discourse of exile and deprivation, which is neither necessarily nor exclusively that of the Jews, and transforms it into a state of the mind and the soul that is totally incommensurable with political aestheticism. This discourse cannot be ‘cheated’ or ‘corrupted’ because it is not susceptible to the seduction of purity – it is already impure. Moreover, it cannot be appropriated by any geopolitics or geo-philosophy because it belongs nowhere, it has no home. It is not the discourse of a people, but that of the alienated and the dispossessed who never possessed anything: ‘nous qui sans jamais rien avoir avons tout perdu.’ Massimo’s call to Marcella to ‘start immediately’ aims at dissuading her from her plan to kill the dictator. From her answer, it is clear that she is not listening:

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<sup>130</sup> OR, p. 233.

« Tu es comme un enfant », dit-elle doucement sans prétendre l'avoir écouté ou entendu. « Si je te fais confiance, c'est parce que tu as l'air d'un enfant. »

Marcella's answer typifies Yourcenar's attitude towards the discourse of otherness. Massimo's voice is lost, neither audible nor comprehensible, in the midst of the fight between conflicting systems of representation. By calling him 'un enfant', Marcella excludes him from her system of concepts and ideas, which opposes fascism, but is not its 'other'.

Yet Marcella understands perfectly well. By calling Massimo 'un enfant', she recognizes in him that state of the psyche which Lyotard, drawing from Freud, calls its permanent infancy. She sees that even though Massimo lives the same existential anxiety and historical terror as herself, he does not have the means to represent it and wishes no dramatic catharsis for it. Marcella's simultaneous deafness and profound attention to Massimo's voice marks an extraordinary moment of awareness of Yourcenar's ambivalence towards existence and the political-aesthetic.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis was motivated by a desire to understand the notion of authentic selfhood in Marguerite Yourcenar's fiction and criticism. Her implicit but persistent suggestion that an authentic relationship with the world was still possible in late modernity seemed to me difficult to accept and yet well supported in her work. From *Alexis* (1929) to *Quoi? L'éternité* (1988), Yourcenar made clear that such a relationship must be achieved 'les yeux ouverts', that is, in the *hic et nunc* of individual, political and historical existence.<sup>1</sup> This uncompromising attitude meant that she had to negotiate with the main obstacle on the way to authenticity, namely, the lack of immediacy in the self's dealings with the world. It also meant that she had to take into account the knowledge of this lack as a key feature of modernity.

My research was focused primarily on *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, as this novel allowed me to approach the authentic hero of Yourcenar's narrative from a dual perspective, that of existence and that of politics. In the character of Hadrien, the existential and the political subject are articulated as a function of each other and are examined by Yourcenar in the context of history, considered as a progressive aestheticization of experience. I have tried to show that Yourcenar's attempt to define the existential and the political subject in a uniform manner was based on the idea that conceptual representation complicates both of these aspects of subjectivity in the

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<sup>1</sup> 'Les yeux ouverts' is the last phrase of *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (1951), and the title of Yourcenar's published interviews with Matthieu Galey. See also n. 45, Chapter 4.

same manner. Beyond *Mémoires*, I relied on other novels, essays on culture, literature and art, as well as paratextual material by Yourcenar, to further support my claim that the subject is perceived by her in terms of its fleetingness and differentiability.

It is this understanding of the differentiability of the subject which situates Yourcenar's thought at the heart of the modern problematic of subjectivity. In my analysis, I highlighted the specifically modern parameters of Yourcenar's perception of the self, but also of language, culture, spatio-temporality and narrative. Given her reluctance to contextualize these themes with reference to cultural and philosophical modernity, as well as the relative dearth of relevant studies, it seemed to me important to compare her views with those of some of her contemporary thinkers who were preoccupied with similar concerns. I tried to show that there are consistent analogies between Yourcenar and Paul de Man's idea of the rhetoricity of selfhood, Walter Benjamin's critique of aesthetic and cultural modernity, and Martin Heidegger's analysis of spatio-temporality. Beyond thematic kinship, these analogies extend to the interpretative paths followed and, in certain cases, to the solutions found.

With reference to Paul de Man's thinking on rhetoric, time and history, I attempted to show how deeply Yourcenar's thought is marked by the ironic knowledge of inauthenticity. Her idea of the gradual re-authentication of the work of art as it slowly disintegrates in the course of its 'life' provides a vital clue for understanding the mechanism by which she attempts to rescue the possibility of authenticity in the modern context. Through a semantic inversion of concepts, she locates authenticity within the repetitive and the inauthentic, purity within the factual and the impure, and subjectivity within the impossibility of the subject.

The semantic inversion of authenticity was further paralleled with Benjamin's idea that modern art opens up the possibility of interpreting reality as illusion and vice versa. In modernity, what was previously considered as 'real' loses its aura and is revealed as a representation. On the other hand, modern representations, especially

film, are shown to contain the real in distorted form. One such representation is translation, which reveals the source text's true fragmentary character. Yourcenar understands *Mémoires d'Hadrien* as a literary and aesthetic fragment, deprives it from its aura, and re-authenticates it by designating this novel as a translation.

But it is with Heidegger's existential phenomenology that Yourcenar's perception of selfhood and art presents the most extensive analogies. There is a sustained commonality of thought between these two thinkers concerning their understanding of facticity, their critique of conceptuality, and their perception of tradition and history. In Chapter 4, I claimed that Yourcenar follows Heidegger in underlining the role of the self in producing its own space and time. For both thinkers, man exists always in a state of spatio-temporal difference in relation to the world, but this permanent difference defines the paradoxical authenticity of the existential subject. This subject becomes authentic by accepting difference. I tried to show how the idea of acceptance led both thinkers to develop a similar understanding of man's role as guardian of the world / shepherd of Being, a position which originates in a non-anthropocentric humanism whose basic principles are also common to both.

The analogies between Yourcenar and Heidegger extend further, to what their theories of existence and history knowingly exclude or do not manage to think adequately. In exploring these negative analogies, the thesis moved on from investigating the notion of authenticity in Yourcenar and identifying its modern features to criticizing the desire for authenticity and demonstrating its philosophical limits. In Chapter 5, I tried to show that Yourcenar's inverted concept of authenticity is in fact anchored on a model of universality which she associates with ancient Greece. Furthermore, I tried to trace the marks of an incompatible difference between this Greek aesthetico-political model and the 'anaesthetic' people of 'the jews' – a term coined by Lyotard to refer to all the people, whether Jews or not, who suffer the violent repercussions of the West's quest for identity. Re-reading *Mémoires* under the

light of these definitions, I found evidence that the vision of European identity promoted in the novel was in fact not free from the metaphysics of modern political aestheticism. As the figure of Hadrien suggests, it is not possible to imagine a non-totalitarian political subject as long as subjectivity is evaluated in terms of identity and authenticity, whether inverted or not.

Two sets of issues arise from this discussion. The first has to do with a possible re-evaluation of Yourcenar's work after the discrediting of the idea of authentic subjectivity. The second set of issues concerns the possibility of the subject, its political and existential 'identity' and its continuing significance in the broader historico-political context of postmodernity.

As regards the first set of issues, I would like to raise four points which may also be read as suggestions for further research.

a. This thesis suggests that the modernity as such of Yourcenar should no longer be a topic of debate. Rather, the question now is to study further the ways in which Yourcenar perceives and processes specifically modern themes and sensibilities. In my thesis, I highlighted some of these themes, including fragmentariness, the awareness of irony and the facticity of the self. I also suggested that Yourcenar's relationship with modernity is so formative in her work that it extends to what the modern, in some of its manifestations, excludes and forgets – most markedly, the thought of the Other, beyond ontology, aestheticism and humanism. Comparative studies of Yourcenar's work in relation to other approaches to existence and subjectivity, such as those by Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus, could further support these arguments. Moreover, Yourcenar's theatre and autobiography constitute particularly interesting sources for investigating the presence of modernity and even postmodernity in her work.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> There have already been studies examining the specifically modern features of Yourcenar's theatre and autobiography. For example, see André Blanc's essay 'Marguerite Yourcenar et la tentation

b. Further, in my thesis I found evidence that the notion of authentic subjectivity in Yourcenar is based on an exclusive concept of totality and universality and can only be pursued at the expense of what the West rejects as a non-subject (the voiceless figure of Antinoüs, 'the jews'). Consequently, the question arises as to whether we now must understand the Yourcenarian subject as an ideological and potentially violent formation, a projected or imagined identity between man and world, and therefore the very thing against which it is supposed to stand. I certainly do not think so. In the first four chapters of my thesis I tried to show that Yourcenar makes no concessions in her attempt to think the subject in terms of the rupture which separates it from itself and precludes the possibility of identity. This is the point of re-interpreting identity as the constancy of difference, and authenticity as repetition and re-construction. This subject cannot be reduced to the autonomous, self-sufficient subject of metaphysics, even if its metaphysical or even totalitarian aspects are revealed, once it is projected onto the level of history and politics. It may well be, as I claimed, that Hadrien is not the liberated and post-ironic political subject that *Mémoires* suggests – as does Yourcenar herself in her interviews and 'Carnets de notes'. Still, he represents, in my opinion, a consciously modern moment in the ongoing quest for a subject which tries to come to terms with its infirmity and heteronomy.

Like any interpretation which claims to be critically 'solid' and 'objective', my argument that the figure of Hadrien gives in to the impulse of the metaphysical and to the illusion of representability necessarily contains an element of generalization. It must be stressed that Yourcenar's work articulates more than one form of

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théâtrale : raisons d'un échec', in Maria Capusan *et al.* (eds), *Marguerite Yourcenar: Citoyenne du monde* (Clermont-Ferrand: SIEY, 2006), pp. 63-73. Blanc compares Yourcenar's efforts as a playwright to the theatre of Giraudoux, Sartre, Anouilh and Cocteau. With regard to Yourcenar's autobiography, I already mentioned May Chehab's 'Cerner l'être, une figure de la modernité ?', at the beginning of Chapter 3. Anna Elizabeth Snyman's *L'Autoreprésentation dans le Labyrinthe du monde de Marguerite Yourcenar* (2003), constitutes a more extensive investigation of Yourcenar's dialogue with the modern and the postmodern in her autobiography. Unpublished thesis, <<http://etd.rau.ac.za/theses/available/etd-03292004-100448/>> [accessed on 27/08/07].

subjectivity, and in fact culminates in the quasi-total absence of the subject (the writer herself) in her autobiography. For that reason, I finished Chapter 5 by giving some examples of how the presence of a different subject, which is not thoroughly thought in *Mémoires*, persists in the Yourcenarian text. Future research would be able to trace more instances of that irreducible otherness in Yourcenar's work.

c. One question that needs to be addressed further is that of realism as a technique of authentication of the text, and as a 'distortion of distortion' of reality. In chapters 1 and 2 of my thesis, I examined the idea that realism in Yourcenar is not the arbitrary identification of a linguistic sign with a referent but a narrative strategy for leaving in obscurity what cannot or must not be represented. Realism was proven to be intimately linked with Yourcenar's thought on existence and art, and it was understood in the context of accepting difference in representation. Should this definition of realism be re-evaluated in the light of my later conclusions? If it is true that Yourcenar's narrative is partly motivated by a desire for identity, then is it also arguable that realism is used in her work to intimate that identity is indeed possible, after all? For instance, if, as I argued in Chapter 5, *Mémoires d'Hadrien* suggests that a new identity based on the Greek archetype is possible for Europe in the wake of the Second World War, is the realism of the novel one way of supporting this suggestion? These questions relate to the broader issue of whether realism necessarily serves the desire for narrative unity, for the effacement of difference, and for the self-sufficiency of fictional representation.

However, realism means different things at different times for different writers and readers. As Buck-Morss argued with reference to 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', even film, the most 'faithful' representation of reality, can be used for the purpose of critical enlightenment or its opposite.<sup>3</sup> A further discussion of realism remains beyond the purview of my thesis. At the same time, I

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<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 3, n. 24.



believe that realism as such does not relate to the controversial discourse of authenticity and political identity *in a necessary way*. Let us remember that Proust used realism for his extensive deconstitution of the subject in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, while on the other hand Heidegger's re-constitution of Dasein in *Being and Time* is far from realist. I think that Yourcenar's effort to reclaim realism for the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century novel remains valid. It enabled her to read Thomas Mann's fiction and Cavafy's poetry in an original way, as I discussed in Chapter 1. Even more importantly, it allowed her to approach narratively what she called 'l'informulé et [...] l'ineffable', and to access negatively what she thought that lied beyond the limits of language.<sup>4</sup>

d. Finally, Yourcenar's theory of history and especially of the writing of history could be researched further along the lines of the present thesis. While I did not focus especially on historiography and the relationship between history and fiction, I have been discussing a number of themes that would be central to such a study. These include: Yourcenar's perception of history as an accumulation of traditions and representations; the perception of the past as being essentially of the same substance as the present; the ensuing possibility of empathetic identification with the past through the projection of the self in time; and the representability of history in writing, in so far as all existence, including the past, can be depicted in terms of its simultaneous presence and absence. While there has been much scholarly interest in Yourcenar's understanding of history and in her technique as a writer of historical novels, the study I am envisioning would seek to investigate these topics in relation to modernity and the way it figures in Yourcenar's perception and philosophy of history.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *EM*, p. 305, from 'Ton et langage dans le roman historique'.

<sup>5</sup> Prominent among other publications on Yourcenar's relationship on history is Maurice Delcroix (ed.), *Roman, histoire et mythe dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar* (Tours: SIEY, 1995).

With regard to the second set of issues, those that bear upon the concept of subjectivity and its vicissitudes, my thesis has referred to some key moments in the deconstruction of authenticity in modernity and beyond. Heidegger's critique of the autonomy of the Cartesian ego, Benjamin's account of the loss of aura, and de Man's rejection of the possibility of authenticity are complemented by Lacoue-Labarthe's suggestion that the subject can be approached in terms of its 'inherent infirmity'. This, as I explained, is a subject which 'desists', which is 'nothing in and of itself', and which, under different guises, we have always invested with the desire for a 'stable essence' and a self.<sup>6</sup> Although this thesis does not seek to offer conclusive assertions about the state of the contemporary discussion on subjectivity, it endorses Lacoue-Labarthe's assessment. Heidegger's effort to preserve the possibility of existential and historical fulfilment ended in failure and demonstrated the limits of philosophy and the perils of the discourse of authenticity. Lacoue-Labarthe's 'infirm' subject (or rather, infirm 'subject') constitutes an effort to re-think subjectivity beyond the measure of authenticity / creativity / identity and their opposites. As Lyotard explains further, this subject cannot be evaluated in terms of the authenticity or otherwise of its relationship with the world. This subject, Lyotard insists, should be the Other, not simply the structural opposite, of the authentic subject of onto-theology.

Thus understood, the thought of absolute alterity is only contingently present in Yourcenar. Still, we must remember that she brought together Hadrien, the philhellenist emperor-poet, and Rabbi Akiba to the negotiation table. At a crucial moment in *Mémoires* she juxtaposed allegorically the Greek thinking of subjectivity and representability with the Jewish experience of infinite otherness which resists representation. My point remains that 'the negotiation table' as the scene of this meeting favours Hadrien's voice and his skills in dialogue and reasoning, to which

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<sup>6</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, pp. 71-72.

the Rabbi can only respond with a monotonous and monologous repetition of his alterity. The more the Rabbi's voice is stifled, the more we realize that the dialogue and the peace of which Yourcenar is dreaming are not possible. This impossibility is stressed by Derrida, who, in his essay 'Violence et métaphysique', asks himself:

Sommes-nous des Grecs? Sommes-nous des Juifs? Mais qui, nous? Sommes-nous (question non-chronologique, question pré-logique) *d'abord* des Juifs ou *d'abord* des Grecs? Et l'étrange dialogue entre le Juif et le Grec, la paix elle-même, [...ont-ils] la forme de la séparation infinie et de la transcendance impensable, indicible, de l'autre?<sup>7</sup>

This thesis has explored this 'transcendance impensable, indicible' in relation to Yourcenar's thinking of 'l'informulé et [...] l'ineffable'. It has attempted to show that Yourcenar developed a characteristically modern understanding of difference and alterity. In many ways, the concepts of representation, identity, subjectivity, and authenticity in Yourcenar's writing touch, and press on, the limits of philosophy in European modernity, as they appear to us today. Thus, her fiction and criticism stand at a critical juncture in the history of modern European thought where literature and philosophy negotiate their limits, and the narrative subject comes face to face with its Other.

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Violence et métaphysique', *L'Écriture et la différence* (Seuil: Paris, 1967), pp. 117-228, (pp. 227-28), emphasis by the author.

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This section of the bibliography contains the editions of Yourcenar's works used in this thesis. Each of the Pléiade editions, *OR* and *EM*, is followed by a list of the works included in it.

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*Denier du rêve.*

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*Anna, Soror....*

*Un homme obscur.*

*Une belle matinée.*

*Feux.*

*Nouvelles Orientales.*

*La Nouvelle Eurydice*

### Theatre, autobiography, criticism, translations

*Essais et Mémoires* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991) Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 378.

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